

**States of Displacement:
Voice and Narration in Refugee Stories**

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Abstract

This thesis probes three texts to explore pathways between narration and refugee voices.

In Dave Eggers' text *What is the What* (2008), the words 'novel' and 'autobiography' on the title page set a framework for an exploration of the displacement of both genres. As Achak Deng, the Sudanese refugee-exile claims to have "gone out in search of a writer," so this thesis has sought textual manifestations of the voices of those labeled "refugees". In Eggers' text a temporarily-gagged narrator presents the question as to how the writer-refugee collaboration allows the voice of a refugee to be heard.

In *Little Liberia: an African Odyssey in New York* (2011), Jonny Steinberg's placement of himself inside the text demonstrates a different narrative approach to this question as he opts to share subject-space with refugee-exiles, Rufus Arkoi and Jacob Massaquoi. Unsettling the idea of 'protagonist', the text challenges borders between story and history, telling and writing. Through a narrative relationship Steinberg probes acts of recounting, listening, reviewing in the routes he takes to the text eventually written.

By contrast, *Luxurious Hearses*, a novella by Uwem Akpan, places the extreme fate of the refugee-protagonist in the hands of a third-person narrator to wrestle with the distinctions between voice, mediation and representation. Through Jubril and his co-commuters, the text investigates forms of "rupture" (Bakhtin, 2000) that occur when identities are opportunistically exposed to social labeling.

Writer, reader and displaced person emerge as subjects of an economic framework which positions them within the powerful confines of terms such as citizen, refugee, exile. Said's affirming insight thus presents a challenge to all on this continuum to "cross borders, (to) break barriers of thought and experience" (Said, 2000:185). Reading the text then becomes associated with interpreting events through the collaborative work of relating, and through reviewing the frames of reference.

This thesis examines narrative approaches to refugee voices with the question 'How do voice and narration inflect the transitions in these texts involving refugees?' Rather than the easy transference this may seem to involve, acts of entrusting the timbre of such stories to texts require political vigilance and a sensibility cognizant that a globalized environment implicates all in the crises creating refugees.

Chapter One: Introduction

The word refugee conjures a temporariness that belies the long-term trajectory of political-economic power accountable for such displacement. Unprecedented numbers of refugees in different parts of the world necessitate a reassessment of borders. And as the narrative of refugee accounts enters discourse, related questions extend this challenge to include textual borders.

This thesis attempts to explore such challenges through three texts, in which the processes and agents that lead to their creation are considered. The historical-economic forces that exert their power on the lives of refugees form a necessary foreground as the writer and their tools become the subjects of a larger story which incorporates them into itself.

One point of entry is how the voice of a refugee emerges in such texts and the narrative processes that facilitate or stifle this. What may be understood by 'voice' in a printed text forms part of what I shall consider.

Edward Said (1935-2003), "Palestinian exile, literary critic ... theorist and one of the founding figures of Postcolonial Studies" (Buchanan, 2010:417), has written extensively of the historical-political displacement that is exile, and by extension refugee experience. He describes it as:

the predicament of a reality without absolutes, of language as a synthesis of constantly experienced moments, and of mind as incarnated irreducibly in things where, despite all our efforts, 'we never see our ideas or freedom face to face.'
(Said, 2001a:xxi)

Here Said articulates the complexity involved in negotiating conditions of continual uncertainty. He sees speaking and writing as the necessary effort to interpret an always-unstable world. Hence the struggle to imagine change/s involves a creative engagement with material concerns and a courageous patience.

This thesis probes such a "predicament" in textual spaces where the voices of refugees might be 'heard'. Three primary texts are discussed: *What is the What* by David Eggers (2008), *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* by Jonny Steinberg (2011) and *Luxurious Hearses* by Uwem Akpan (2008). This introductory section offers outlines of the

texts and their writers, a description of the significance of recurrent terms, historical frames, and reference to three key theoretical voices who feature in the discussion.

Main Texts and Writers

What is the What (2008) is the story of a Sudanese refugee named (Valentino) Achak Deng. In seeking a writer he was directed to Dave Eggers, who is also a US publisher, to whom he recounted his experience. As its title-page is shared by the words, 'novel' and 'autobiography' and the names of both Deng and Eggers, the text is troubled by the question of whose voice emerges.

Little Liberia (2011) by Jonny Steinberg, a South African and Oxford academic, concerns two refugee-exiles recounting their experience of the Liberian war, from Staten Island, New York. Having heard about Rufus Arkoi and Jacob Massaquoi, Steinberg goes in search of them and their stories. In another contrast to Eggers' approach, Steinberg's self-scrutiny of his part as interviewer-listener and writer presents limitations and possibilities of such involvement as a story in itself, integral to the text.

Luxurious Hearses (2008) is a novella by Uwem Akpan, a Nigerian Jesuit priest resident in the US. It tells the story of a young boy, Jubril, in whom the particularities of Nigerian struggles are seen for their divisive and unifying potential. In this text a third-person narrator facilitates access to a refugee voice through the silences of its protagonist and through exchanges amongst the group of co-commuting refugees.

Key Terms

Refugee

With its roots in the French, Latin and Greek words for 'fugitive', the word 'refugee' combines the ideas of 'fleeing from' with 'fleeing back to' (Skeat, 1993:164). But a detailed description from The United Nations Convention Relating to Refugees defines a refugee as one:

who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is

unwilling to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country...' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Office [UNHCR], 2010:3)

Thus the term 'refugee' signifies temporary status on a continuum of departures that includes displaced person, asylum-seeker, illegal alien, undocumented foreign national, illegal immigrant, migrant, exile etc. It is often a euphemism for deracination, profound upheaval, violent displacement and engineered political instability. In English there is no abstract noun that means 'the state of being a refugee,' no concept for this current international crisis which calls for cross-field discussion.

Such uncertainties that trouble the lives of refugees are explored here for the ways in which writers have transformed them into textual representations of displacement.

Displacement

Certain critical interpretations of "displacement" find their source in Freud's concept of "dream-work" in which what is "latent" becomes "manifest" (Buchanan, 2010:135-136). Refugee accounts reflect the "latent" bonds of complex economic relationships "manifest" by physical "displacement".

A dictionary entry to the term displacement marked "obsolete" explains it as "continental drift" (Pearsall, 2002:413). An adjusted application of this idea marks all three texts as products of cross-continental (and transnational) liaison – between North America and Africa (the Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Liberia and Nigeria). So here displacement also alludes to historical and current expressions of power in relationships: between states, writers and tellers and between oral and written accounts.

Refugees' experience of socio-geographical displacement may enable them to bring creative potential in the form of critical insights to their places of refuge where hitherto unquestioned practices may become destabilized.

But warning that "exile literature" should not "objectif(y) an anguish and a predicament" (2001a:174), Said interestingly notes that

(m)odern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today

because of refugees from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. (Said, 2001a:173)

Perspectives from those thus displaced, to paraphrase Said, have enriched creative practices in places of exile. Similarly the texts in question stimulate critical discussion: each negotiates particular borders and investigates gaps between familiar terms and their reconfigured appearance.

Voice

Older references to “voice” associate it with “tone” and further with the Aristotelian idea of “‘ethos’ in a work of persuasive rhetoric” (Abrams, 1981:132). Wayne C. Booth extended this use of “voice” in the formulation “‘implied author’” – all of which imbued it with the power of an authorial imprint on the text (ibid.).

The texts in question here however explore “voice” in different narrative ranges. These include a relationship between teller and writer, and resistance to memory and mediation. Thus ‘voice’ is in part interpreted as the projection of a refugee’s experience. How subjectivity echoes this in the collaborative creation of the Eggers and Steinberg texts, and in the third-person narration of Akpan’s text, is of particular interest. Textual mechanisms that increase or decrease the audibility of the refugee’s voice thus form an object of enquiry in this thesis.

The word voiceprint offers an intriguing metaphor for the concept of voice here. Literally, it is a visual representation of an individual’s voice depicting its “acoustic characteristics” (Bullock et al., 1977:898). The primary texts may be seen to demonstrate a similar relayed effect. Tellers leave ‘acoustic prints’ in the writer’s textual composition or ‘visual’ representation of their voice. So the reader receives a voice and a print.

Like the substance that is made to show up a fingerprint is not the print itself, so these collaborative efforts “manifest” a “latency” (Buchanan, 2010:135-136) that shows up their respective written and recounted production.

Narration

Narration is considered closely throughout this discussion. It may be read as the writer's attempt to project but also to represent the voice of a refugee, forming a kind of textual sound-system. Examined in relation to structure, narrative roles and audience it enables a critical exploration of subjectivity. How narration is problematized in the text reveals a consciousness of the tricky compromises in the text's relationship with a living person/ living people.

In Eggers' text narration is internalized and silent, thereby gesturing at the textual and practical difficulties for a refugee voice in making itself heard. This approach to narration simultaneously places the subjectivity and agency (voice) of Achak Deng in jeopardy. In Steinberg's work the voice-to-text challenge relays narration in a kind of three-voice fugal arrangement in which writer and refugees exchange places of prominence.

The effect of this approach is to distribute the complexity of voice as something in which the text and writer are seen to play a relative (rather than dominant) part. In Akpan's text a third-person narrator introduces a critical view of mediated accounts. Simultaneously the limitations of this narration are aligned with the protagonist's constraints.

Setting

Displacement in the lives represented destabilizes 'setting' as a textual element. Consequently the spatio-temporal momentum of the accounts induces flashbacks as a structural feature. It also constitutes an acknowledgement that the experience and the writing are geographically separated.

What is the What and *Little Liberia* emanate from the US in written and published form. And while *Luxurious Hearses* was written and published in the US, its culturally-induced political tensions are fled, and aired, in separate Nigerian settings. Thus events in the Sudan region, Liberia and Nigeria destabilize the idea of setting as a secure reference, thereby intensifying an interest in its historicization.

Historical Background

In the history of the African continent the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade first and colonialism later, require ongoing political analysis if their reconstituted manifestations are to be recognized. Cultivated extremes of wealth and poverty, and the wars for resources are international signals today of inequalities that sustain this legacy. A relatively recent analysis discloses that: “(b)etween 1966 and 1993, about ten million people lost their lives and at least five times as many were wounded in African conflicts. More than twenty million became refugees or were displaced from their homes in their own country” (Legum, 1999:32).

Coevally situated in the same transcontinental economic frame as the teller and writer, the reader is already a participant in the life of the text and thus historically *interested*.

In acknowledgement of the vital narrative relationship between setting and historical background, the political *foreground* these represent is necessary.

The Sudan

Britain’s establishment of the borders of the Sudan in 1899 involved the administered entrenchment of divisions between the north and the south of the country. Later this compromised national independence. Between 1955 and 1999 “...more than 1.9 million people ... died... as a result of war.... (and) (o)ver four million ...fle(d) their homes ... displaced internally and internationally” (Abusharaf, 2006:140).

Two peace accords (in 1972 and 2005) were signed, with the latter entailing the secession of South Sudan. Historian Reid reflects that:

Forced migration as the result of prolonged conflict has greatly weakened the agrarian base of many regions, and persecution and violence have led to the mass movement of people in Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, and Mozambique. Refugee camps of staggering proportions have sprung up in troubled regions, some of these acquiring a permanence which bodes ill for the economic recovery of those areas. (Reid, 2012:350)

Showing the impact of such upheaval *What is the What* (2008) depicts the survival and maturation of a Sudanese refugee. Here the American initiative – The Lost Boys of Sudan

Foundation – is shown to give the protagonist access to the US; the US sale of arms to the Khartoum government spanning decades remains obscured.

Liberia

One historian notes that “(u)ntil 1957 the region’s only sovereign state was Liberia” (Boyd, 1987, p. 96). More provocatively another asserts: “Liberia began as a venture of American philanthropists in 1821 (and was) constituted an independent republic in 1847....(but) its foster-parent, the United States did not ... recognize it until 1862 (Oliver and Fage, 1988:134-135).

However after a coup in 1980, Samuel Doe (militarily trained by the US) became president of Liberia. Despite the dissidence he sowed and his persecution of those labeled Gio and Mano, the US continued its support of him to guarantee its rubber-supply. Warlord Charles Taylor overthrew Doe, and war continued. Refugees from Liberia flowed from the country throughout the 1990s, “cross(ing) into Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Guinea In a single year, 700 000 people left.” Resignedly the people voted Charles Taylor into the presidency in 1997. But “by ...2002, Liberia’s fragile five-year peace was coming to an end” (Moorehead, 2005:160-163).

Along this violent trajectory the state’s changing beneficiaries were first attracted then forced to flee; and activists were propelled into resistance and exile.

Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York (Steinberg, 2011) is in some ways a self-critical narrative study in accessing seemingly irretrievable refugee narratives. Its intrigue lies in its apparent blurring of a distinction between narrator-protagonist and writer in a careful engagement with this history and its political offspring.

Nigeria

With a history of regional divisions exploited by British laws, Nigerians have continued experiments to reconstitute their large country. Following independence in 1960 and later the Biafran war, federal arrangements were replaced by a “second Nigerian republic...with an executive president” in 1976. The struggle for equitable access to resources continues in the context of an impoverishing foreign regimen of oil extraction with disastrous socio-

environmental consequences (Oliver & Fage, 1995:257-258). This crisis has been exacerbated by leadership practices and regional zoning that involves minimizing the unifying features of culture and extolling its vulnerability to divisive administration (Ejimabo, 2013: 2).

Akpan's *Luxurious Hearses* shows how assertions of culture or religion are too easily summoned to explain such struggles. It is a text in which the third-person narrator slips between expressions of individual and collective subjectivity, straddling the power of mobility and the suffering that silence may signify. The 'collective voice' shows a capacity for entertaining divergent views, but also a susceptibility to the limitations of uncritical nationalist impulses.

Theorists

In this respect Edward Said's insights (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2009) are relied on for the way in which they probe dispossession and its effects. He illuminates forms of invisibility suffered by one in exile or in this case, one who becomes a refugee. His views affirm the enabling perspectives which the experience of flight across borders may produce, the insight and sympathetic detachment that may come with first-hand knowledge of displacement. Said's analysis is attuned to the imprint of history and cultural affiliation on such lives, and also to their textual representation. His perspective on the inescapably relationship-bound space for interpreting and negotiating difference in politically-charged liaisons, speaks interestingly to the writer-teller liaisons evident in these texts and to the emergence of what may be the voice of a refugee.

In his writing, Algerian-born philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) uses a thorough critique of language to investigate the thinking this promotes in 'discourse between' texts, and between texts and actions. Referred to here is Derrida's (2002) exploration of the 'presence' of more than one participant within the narration of a text. The manifestation of an absent subject or "anacoluthon" (through the presence of its assistant, or "acolyte"), forms the central strand of his argument concerning the role of the narrator (Derrida, 2002:180-184).

This idea facilitates an exploration of subjectivity in the 'pre-text'-ual relationships formative of Eggers' and Steinberg's texts. It also relates to the historical prominence of the US in the destabilization of Liberia and South Sudan. Significantly it engages the way refugees' lives are marked by the need for, and disappearance of, an assistant. Epitomizing temporary status, the word and the person 'refugee' also represent an absence – that of the citizen (or subject).

Finally, Bakhtin's interest in the novel as an instrument of displacement casts light on this aspect of the primary texts. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian linguist, literary critic" and significant "literary theorist" (Buchanan, 2010:417). In *The Dialogic Imagination* (2000) Bakhtin explores the novel's temporal immediacy in "inconclusive present-day reality." For him the novel's acknowledgement of diversity in cultural and linguistic expression has facilitated access to a rejuvenating conscious relation to both the contemporary world and its ancient texts. It therefore represents a creative "rupture" enabling fresh insights.

His concept of rupture relates both to deracination and to the possibility of a mutually-beneficial engagement with unfamiliar cultural or intellectual environments. His insights help in locating such signals for the voice of a refugee in the narrative orchestration of the text.

Key Question

A central question in this thesis is, 'What approaches to presenting the voice of a refugee does the text reveal?'

Several configurations of subjectivity provide or deny access to the voices of protagonists inside and outside a text. Said comments on such complexity with reference to Conrad's texts and letters: "Conrad's stake in the structures of experience he had created was absolutely crucial, since it was rooted in the human desire to make a character of and for himself" (Said, 1966/2000:12).

Said's insight concerns the intricate processes of perception that traffic between what is lived, what is written and how this is read. Conrad's consciousness of this tenuousness – in himself, the same person – is captured in Said's captivating phrase, "the structures of

experience.” This phrase suggests a vital connection between voice and its means of projection in both text and life.

In the light of this, the refugee voices under discussion ask to be read with a critical awareness of the possibility that the “structures” and the “experience” have been displaced in certain ways, implying that in content and narration the texts activate a displacement of their own.

The thesis is divided into four remaining chapters, three of which discuss each text respectively, and one concluding the discussion.

Chapter Two: A Discussion of *What is the What* (2008) by Dave Eggers

What is the What represents a collaborative effort between Valentino Achak Deng, a South Sudanese refugee and public speaker, and Dave Eggers, a US citizen, writer and publisher. The title page of this text refers to it as both “autobiography” and “novel,” drawing attention to its shared and also split nature. In a complex weave of settings and time-lines the text is divided into three books. The story progresses in immediate time (three days), recalled time (seventeen years) and current time (five years to the time of publication.) It is the story of the life of a refugee who as a seven-year-old is separated from his parents as he flees his hometown of Marial Bai in the second civil war in Sudan during a brutal attack on the South by upholders of the Khartoum government.¹ What unfolds includes the narrator’s journey of over a thousand kilometres with similarly-orphaned “Lost Boys” all making their way to Ethiopia from (then) southern Sudan. The account depicts the fragility and strength of children moving through war-ravaged environments (including refugee camps) – in which their lives remain under threat at worst, and insignificant at best. Simultaneously, it tells of a refugee experience of the US.

Through this parallel spatio-temporal approach to the narrative, the text moves the reader back and forth between the US and the Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, immersing him/her in the desperate conditions that required flight, in the dangerous circumstances of an armed robbery and in the difficult socio-economic struggle in a foreign country. The text conveys the paradoxically transient stasis in the life of one classified refugee, in whom movement and alteration constantly impose an entrapment, or for whom entrapment in life-threatening situations constantly forces flight. Tentative occupation of any place and the struggle for resources also give meaning to this experience. So the fluidity intrinsic to identity occurs in existentialist crises that have to be apprehended also literally in the life of refugees.

In her discussion of Jameson’s description of subject positions also as the fulfilment of evolving social roles, Marcia Landy illuminates the political link with this apparent anomaly:

These ‘subject positions’ (are) ...indications of ...the politics attendant on late capitalist logic in transforming people into ‘populations’ and assigning them with

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¹ This war lasted from 1983 to 2005.

new and ephemeral identities as 'asylum-seekers,' 'refugees,' and, most abstractly, 'mobile'...subjects.Mobility ...involves the unimpeded movement of capital, whereas the movement of populations is subject to economic and political constraints, and this is where questions of social class arise concerning its composition and its visibility as a category of analysis. (Landy, 2006:149)

The question of subjectivity here is framed by a description of class that is itself destabilized in the context of "the movement of populations." This perspective facilitates cross-field enquiry that may subvert complacent helplessness at the large numbers of refugees across the world today. It allows this reality to be interpreted in terms critical of the trans-border mobility enjoyed by capital at the expense of people who are turned into refugees through resultant wars.

Within this broad frame, *What is the What* is discussed to find out whether the voice of the refugee Achak Deng is, or can be 'heard' in the text. Some of the effects of its narrative construction come under consideration.

In its claim to be two genres simultaneously the text sets up two key orientations. So to whom the telling in the contextually-varied narrative of *What is the What* may be attributed, becomes part of an intrigue this text presents through its dually-described claims, 'autobiography' and 'novel,' and through its several time-lines.

The Preface

The Preface is of particular interest as it is only here, outside the ambiguous main text, that the reader may feel they are given 'direct' access to the voice of Achak Deng. The Preface forms part of the paratext, which is everything – word and image – that is not the body of the text itself but that constitutes the format of the book. Genette (1987/1997, quoted by McDonald, 2013:3) explains that paratext is "...as Phillippe Lejeune put it ...'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text'."

Genette's pithy description – "'a zone not only of transition but also of transaction'" (ibid, p. 3) – demarcates where some of the disquieting features of *What is the What* are to be found. In its paratext Deng and Eggers 'appear' in ways that contrast and overlap with representations in the body of the text. The two-page Preface introduces and explains the five-hundred-and-thirty-eight-page text which follows. In this marginal space Deng states:

This book began as part of my struggle to reach out to others through public speaking. I told my story to many audiences, but I wanted the world to know the whole truth of my existence.... I wanted to reach out to a wider audience by telling the story of my life in book form. Because I was not a writer, I asked Mary (Williams) to put me in touch with an author to help me write my biography. (Eggers, 2008:xiii-xiv)

This extract offers an insight into Deng's vision for the book he may have wished to write, or to *have* written with him; it suggests that at first Deng perceives the writing of his story as an extension of the public oral-account he is used to giving.

Here, in the paratext, the words, "my story" appear to stand clear of the main text's narrative representation of Deng. The words, "the whole truth" are strongly suggestive of his idea of his quest, his initial belief in how a writer might assist him in this "struggle." They indicate an ardent desire to reveal the life he feels he represents historically and geographically: war-riven communities absent from view in the US, but present in his mind and survivor's body.

Yet in this paratextual authorial "fringe" or "privileged place" (Genette, 1987/1997 quoted by McDonald, 2013:3) Deng's description of a collaborative decision hints at disappointment: "*we simply had to pronounce 'What Is the What' a novel*" (Eggers, 2008:xiv) (my italics). It implies a lack of choice, bespeaks a genre-consciousness that does not quite concur with Deng's misuse of the word biography (his phrase suggests 'autobiography'). So where does this genre-imperative come from?

Deng's line, "I asked ...(for) an author to *help me write my biography* (my italics)" raises further questions: In which ways was Deng assisted to write, or to assist in having his "biography" written? Viewed in relation to Deng's (autobiographical) public-speaking, the words, "writer," "author," and "biography" suggest a split in agency as well as an imagined continuity. While they imply the singularity of one life-story, the idea of collaboration is still an active ingredient.

The narrative pronouns "me" and "my" cast the Preface in a mould into which Books I, II and III may or may not fit as these work within the frames of what is invoked by the word "novel" with its history and discourse:

The word *novel* began to appear consistently in the 1680s, replacing or competing with *romance*; both terms are used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as what had once been trivial became literature, an instrument of national pride, identification, and cultural advocacy. (Garber, 2011:84)

Garber sketches the novel as an artefact with a history of attachment whose status has also been associated with power. This insight leads the reader to look at the ways in which Deng's life-story, like his life, is positioned within the borders of a cultural and economic milieu where it splits and shifts with the novelist's cinematic camera between the US and the Sudan region.

In his chapter, 'Between Worlds,' Edward Said reflects on his experience of the process of "...beginning to articulate a history of loss and dispossession that had to be extricated, minute by minute, word by word, inch by inch," and of taking on the task of "...working in an almost entirely negative element, the non-existence, the non-history which (he)...had somehow to make visible" (Said, 2000:563). What this illuminates is the work Deng would have engaged in: the painstaking process of putting words to a political past marked by what had to be left behind and what had been violently taken away; one that had to be retrieved in an environment largely impervious to this.

Said expresses acutely the effort of bringing to light something whose presence is unacknowledged. In the vein of Jameson's (and Landy's) comment on " 'mobile'...subjects," (Landy, 2006:149) he goes on to speak of the intricate involvement of language in this endeavour:

What concerned me now was how a subject was constituted, how a language could be formed - writing as a construction of realities that served one or another purpose instrumentally. This was the world of power and representations, a world that came into being as a series of decisions made by writers, politicians, philosophers to suggest or adumbrate one reality and at the same time efface others. (Landy, 2006: 563)

Said speaks of the determining influence of political-linguistic power in both a person's life and the written account of it. This sets up a "subject" and the space in which this subject finds themselves. His concern is that such power may overwrite one history by imposing a monolithic culture overshadowing the nuanced and different qualities of others. Yet this

consciousness can inspire a language to excavate and reconstruct what is being denied or obscured.

It appears that Deng and Eggers would have found themselves challenged in different ways by Said's concerns, each constituting and being constituted as subjects at particular moments in the process of which this text is the product. *Within* Eggers' text however, it is the absence of the subject as the excavator of his own story that re-inscribes his anonymity as subject even while he is made to occupy the place of protagonist-narrator, or character.

Attesting to this, if indirectly, is Phillipe Lejeune's comment in 'The Autobiographical Pact.' In it Lejeune reassesses what he had written in an earlier work. In *Autobiography in France* Lejeune had considered that: "All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel, and often have been imitated" (Lejeune, 1989:13). But later Lejeune adds:

This is accurate as long as we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the name of the author, we make use of a general textual criterion, the identity ("identicalness") of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist). The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.

The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honor his/her *signature*.² (Lejeune, 1989:13-14)

In this context, the paratext of *What is the What* (2008) places the body of the text in a frame of contending assertions. The covers and first pages contain blurbs from high-status media such as 'The Times Literary Supplement,' and a paragraph about "the author," Dave Eggers. *The title page* follows with: 'What is the What / THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VALENTINO DENG/ A NOVEL/ DAVE EGGERS and a printed signature (seemingly Deng's). A regional map of the Sudan lies opposite the copyright page (copyright Dave Eggers), followed by the 'Preface' by Valentino Achak Deng.

The reader is thus presented with *several* agents whose shifting control over the process and product Deng may have thought he was seeking will have to be contemplated. In these pages and in the main text too, 'Deng's' story seems to traverse several borders – national,

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² "By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer. But ...the signature also marks and retains his having-been present" (Derrida, 1988:20). Contentiously, Derrida's exploration in 'Signature, Event, Context' signals inconclusivity in agency, which he illustrates through language and signature (1988:20-21).

commercial, literary, media. Through English a Dinka-speaker's voice finds itself moving between and within these contexts, shape-shifting for survival again.³

With a focus on internal narrative crossings, in *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul Eakin (1985:25) quotes Roland Barthes (1974-1975) as saying: "The one who speaks (in the narrative) is not the one who writes (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one who is." In admitting points of discontinuity in the process of presenting and representing what may be read as voice, agency, authorship and personhood, Barthes' statement draws attention to the complexities present in language and acts of writing. It becomes interestingly pertinent to the transfer of a life-story into a novel by a speaker to a writer. The text *What is the What* may yield some insights in which Barthes' idea about the difficulty of transfer can be explored.

In the *first* edition (2006) of *What is the What*, its Preface reads: "over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation" (Eggers, 2006). In the 2008 Preface, Deng is heard to say:

Over the course of many years, Dave and I have collaborated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversations and by many personal meetings and visitations. We even went to Sudan together in December 2003, and I was able to revisit the town I left when I was seven years old. I told Dave what I knew what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art. (Eggers, 2008:xiv)

While Barthes' statement (1975) may speak to these excerpts in almost literal terms, it also reinforces a consciousness of the relayed and altering course to which Deng's "story" is subjected. The stages of transmission involved time, technological devices, meetings, even temporary relocation. They also involved alterations to the paratext between editions. In the title of the 2006 edition the 'protagonist' is foregrounded, but the text remains in the embrace of the "concocted ...novel". A transition occurs between and within Prefaces in Deng's shift from the phrases "approximating my voice" to "this work of art"; and, "using the basic events of my life as the foundation" to "that material".

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³Dinka is one of several official languages in South Sudan; English is another.

The goodwill towards Eggers notwithstanding, with each of the foregoing phrases an increasing distance emerges between Deng and the text in which he puts his name, not as co-author, not even as 'autobiographer' / "interested party" (Lejeune, 1989:187). Because Dave Eggers features as "author", 'Deng's autograph' actually inscribes his absence in this capacity.

Anacoluthon and Acolyte

In an analysis in which friendly associations and representations come into play, Derrida uses particular terms which illuminate the idea of an absent subject, an anacoluthon, and an assistant or an acolyte. In his chapter, "'Le Parjure,' Perhaps' Derrida (2002) discusses narration in the novel, *Le Parjure*, by considering the anacoluthon, a reference to an ellipsis in which the subject of the sentence is omitted, and the acolyte, one who "...is an attached subject.... (who) assists in a double sense: he is present and he aids, he supplements" (Derrida, 2002:181).

Since *Le Parjure* is concerned with perjury, Derrida investigates its story and narration for this element and points out that the very term 'perjury' is accompanied by, or invokes the breaking of an oath since an oath is already and always referring to something unfulfilled. In this vein of accompanied meanings, Derrida argues that the acolyte by virtue of these acts is not always present – can disappear (Derrida, 2002:181). In some sense this may be interpreted to extend to the subject too whose absence inscribes a consciousness of their absence, and who thus "assists without being absolutely identical or in agreement."

Derrida drives this point towards a reconsideration of narration in the context of the representation of the life of someone actual. He quotes from *Le Parjure*: "'I cannot be without them,' says the narrator, the acolyte who ... 'calls out for another as companion.'" Derrida continues: "Here, then, arises an ordeal putting to the test this tie, this alliance, this 'being together,' this complicity of the acolyte, let us say this uneasy friendship" (Derrida, 2002:184).

Who the acolyte may be in *What is the What* poses an interesting question. Is it Eggers who helps along the story Deng gives him, or is it Deng who helps Eggers produce what the latter overwrites as "a novel"? Also, if one were to consider the writer as helping the narrator or

the subject, then the word 'subject' for Deng himself as a refugee is unsatisfactory. It still suggests a degree of agency that is precisely not locatable as distinctly the voice of Deng because it cannot be extricated from the narrator-protagonist created by Eggers. So if the subject is missing – the figurative equivalent of an anacoluthon – who is the writer as acolyte, assisting? This idea of assistance, of the writer taking on the role of acolyte, appears to remain external to the text, like Deng's paratextual Preface.

The temporal lines of the text introduce two narrative roles in the opening chapter, one in which the narrator appears to address the reader, and one in which the narrator addresses random individuals who are oblivious to their role as audience. The following extract from *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary poetics*, by Rimmon-Kenan offers a helpful step towards examining these positions in *What is the What*:

The narratee is sometimes fully personified, sometimes not. In any case, the narratee is the agent addressed by the narrator, and all the criteria for classifying the latter also apply to the former.Like narrators, narratees can be either covert or overt. A covert narratee is no more than the silent addressee of the narrator, whereas an overt one can be made perceptible through the narrator's inferences of his possible answers...the narratee's actual answer or comments...or his actions. (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:104)

An elusive reflexive element connects listener to teller in Rimmon-Kenan's analysis. Eggers' freely-selected covert narratees comprise an audience of consecutive individuals whose ignorance (of their role) sets them up to ignore the narrator. Deviating from this, in immediate time the narrator of the opening chapter addresses the overt narratee (who will become covert): "'Young man,' I say. He is standing between the kitchen and the living room....I have his attention for a moment. He looks at me briefly and then away" (Eggers, 2008:72). Here (unusually) the narrator makes his voice *heard* in the text, but is overtly disregarded. In this gesture audience-responsibility shifts to the reader who becomes aware of their own intimate but also insecure position as acolyte, a role which varies in relation to the frequent presence or occasional absence of the series of covert narratees within the text.

As Derrida suggests, the absence of a subject is recognizable also by the silence their absence brings about.

Contextualizing this more specifically by considering the economic survival of refugees and immigrants as linked to the exploited class, Landy notes: "...the refugee and the immigrant are symptomatic of the exclusion of large segments of groups from access to power" (Landy, 2006:153). Her discussion suggests that Deng cannot be ignored, isolated in silence or deemed alone in invisibility. In this context the idea of a political anacoluthon suggests itself.

Examining power and silence in her critical work, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak advises that "(p)art of our 'unlearning' project is to articulate ... ideological formulation – by measuring silences, if necessary, into the object of investigation" (Spivak, 1988:296). A double silence may be detected in *What is the What*: the silence of the novel in relation to Deng's quest articulated in the Preface, and the silence of the voice of one who, despite his American liaison, remains a refugee. Deng lives, as Said articulated, in the silence of his own language and history, his perspective of the immediate environment. He finds a writer who projects this silence with borrowed images onto the screen of an American culture that is generally blind to the miracle of his survival, and therefore to his presence.

As one of the 'Lost Boys' of the Sudanese wars Deng is amongst the refugee youths who were taken from a refugee camp and given an opportunity to live, study and work in the US. *What is the What* begins in Deng's US flat where he finds himself the victim of a house-robbery, as an extract from this part of the text will illustrate later.

That this story is launched from the US positions it in various ways. An American context is presented as challenging but also essential to the life of a Sudanese refugee, and significantly, to the account they may wish to give of their struggle. Thus in immediate time (as opposed to recalled time) the US offers and in this way occupies primary temporal-space in the text where despite the violence in the robbery, it represents relative safety and opportunity. Viewable as another form of absent subject or anacoluthon, the US performs a seemingly peripheral though fate-shifting role in Deng's life. It is presented as normative though unstable as different types of refuge for the voice of a refugee are invoked by publishing in English, by a proximity to 'writers', resources (The Lost Boys Foundation) and opportunities (speaking, acting).

In these ways the US plays the acolyte to a displaced and redefined life: its disappearance in these forms of assistance has to be expected. As Derrida states, understanding this aspect of the acolyte is crucial.

In this light the book's reception is captured in its paratext: a reviewer in the *Financial Times* calls it "'(a) remarkable feat of cultural ventriloquism'" (inside cover blurb, 2008 version). Which culture and whose voice? The sentiment is closely reiterated by Michiko Kakutani (2006) in his review, "Mr. Eggers has produced ... a startling act of literary ventriloquism" (2006).

One interpretation of these almost-identical assertions perceives Deng as having no voice of his own ("cultural" or "literary"), with no authority over how he may represent himself and tell his story. Eggers is perceived as having given Deng a 'voice', a form, a commercial and cultural context and audience. Eggers is projected as a skilled intercultural mediator; his "feat" is also that of the 'novel'. The irony is that the ventriloquist can do *no more* than to send his/her *own* voice into a pre-existing form (novel). In the performance content recedes. This signals a crucial loss in the enterprise between Deng and Eggers.

Accustomed to channelling narrative energy, Dave Eggers has been involved in publishing for several years. On his website his works of "Fiction" include *What is the What* (2006). Eggers' (own) autobiography, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), appears under "Non-fiction." Its lengthy paratextual parody, the 'Preface to This Edition' (2000) begins: "For all the author's bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction" (Eggers, 2000:9). Here Eggers cleverly asserts ownership, simultaneously undercutting convention. Later, in the text he amplifies its (orphan) speaker's voice in the plural: "We are disadvantaged but young and virile.... We are foreign exchange people.... We are oddities, sideshows, talk show subjects. We capture everyone's imagination" (Eggers, 2000:97).

In these metaphors for estrangement Eggers sets up a circus-like "exchange" between "foreign ... people" and public curiosity while a trendy image of footloose youth is assembled from the fragmentation of real lives. An ironic tone exploits what it implies is exploited. How did such critique feature in the "transactions" and "transitions" between this

autobiography and *What is the What*, the reader may wonder (Genette (1987/1997, quoted by McDonald, 2013:3).

Lejeune offers a working definition of autobiography: “Retrospective prose narratively written by a real person concerning his(/her) own existence, where the focus is his(/her) individual life, in particular the story of his(/her) personality” (Lejeune, 1989:4). When he considers the complexity underlying this in his chapter ‘Autobiography of those who do not write,’ Lejeune identifies a related assumption: “The interest in autobiographical texts results from the belief in a discourse coming directly from the interested party, reflecting at the same time his(/her) vision of the world and his(/her) manner of expressing himself(/herself)” (1989:187).

As the extracts from *Eggers’ autobiography* might show, such a “vision of the world” and “express(ion)” comprise and expose subject-ive complexities. These would increase in the case of an “interested party” plus writer. At a further remove, in *What is the What*, the “discourse” of the first-person narrator of a supposed autobiography cannot be said to be that of the supposed autobiographer, so the question of “vision” and “expression” is deepened.

Eggers’ narrator may represent an effort to foreground this textual complication through recall – his ‘occupation’ of more than one socio-geographic place ‘simultaneously’. *What is the What* begins in a way that introduces possibilities – despite the immanent constraints of the attack:

I have no reason not to answer the door so I answer the door. I have no tiny round window to inspect visitors so I open the door and before me is a tall, sturdily built African-American woman....She speaks loudly. “You have a phone, sir?” (Eggers, 2008:3)

Space, access, cultural practice, suspicion or curiosity set the scene in America. The writer’s narrator begins the story of Deng’s life, and in these words there are elements which may belong to the writer, and others which may belong to Deng. In the story of the Sudanese refugee which is to follow, doors do not form part of much of it – they would represent privacy, security and control seldom experienced. So this immediate reference emphasizes his place of relocation, as well as his ongoing vulnerability in the act of admitting a stranger.

While the narrator's tone – open to fate – carries self-possession similar to that of the voice in the Preface, the gesture is ironic for a refugee; except for particular moments, the story depicts the absence of invitation. In the narrative of recalled time, exposed conditions signify either transgression or permitted temporary occupation. Also, the adjective "African-American" suggests a localized racialized "discourse," a refugee may deem obstructive.

So at some level Deng's story comes adrift from him. After finishing a well-crafted riveting and moving account the reader rushes back to the Preface and reflects on the title-page with a sense of wistful unease.

Yet while the text confirms a certain power the novel holds as a 'commodity', it also undercuts this. Elements of its oral origins become visible through the text's focus on narration.

The Title

The title, *What is the What*, offers an interesting opening to this angle on the text as it is said to spring from a creation-myth, re-told by the narrator's father in cross-cultural interaction:

My father stood and began...
– When God created the earth, he first made us, the monyjang (the Dinka.)
– God showed man the idea of the cattle.
– God said, 'You can either have these cattle, as my gift to you, or you can have the What.'
'What is the What?' the first man asked. And God said to the man, 'I cannot tell you.'
.... So the man chose cattle....
God was testing to see if he could appreciate what he had been given, if he could take pleasure in the bounty before him, rather than trade it for the unknown. And because the first man was able to see this, God has allowed us to prosper
– Yes, but Uncle DengYou didn't tell us the answer: What is the What?
My father shrugged. – We don't know. No one knows. (Eggers, 2008:61-63)

This extract represents the cultural space the narrator's story has to negotiate. In the life of a refugee, once the conditions of stability are destroyed and flight replaces domesticity, uncertainty replaces familiarity, homelessness replaces access to resources for a livelihood – perhaps the question in the myth is revived. Its contemplation may inspire life-affirming decisions.

Within Dinka beliefs the myth reflects a philosophical framework. Within the construct of the novel its central 'question' is isolated on the cover and stripped of its discursive mark. Verging on the banal here, it represents cultural dislocation before the reader realizes this. In this assimilationist cultural gesture, the title suggests compromise in the Deng-Eggers collaboration.

On the web-page of *Voice of Witness*, established in 2004 and co-founded by Dave Eggers, he explains this project as "a partnership between the people telling their stories and the people transmitting them to the reader" (Eggers & Vollen, 2004). In the process by which its writers/editors "*construct the stories presented* in each book" (my italics) the "empower(ment)" seems to branch into political assistance and narrative channelling. "(T)heir stories" become signals conducted over large social political distances.

Yet lacking articles, the series' title personifies while ironically also acknowledging that what it presents is possibly a "voice" disembodied from its "witness" – the story of one written by another. Similarly, the text *What is the What* prompts questions of a narrative and political nature, 'Whose voice?' and 'Which witness?' Or perhaps here 'voice' assumes the features of collaborative textual projection.

Thus a critical threshold offers a reading of the text to access the story of a refugee, and a reading of it to access the story of Achak Deng of the Preface. Having taken into account the profound difficulty of the latter, it is necessary to engage with the story of the text.

The Idea of the Story

In the creation-story of the title, a phrase stands out: "*the idea of the cattle*" and "*the idea of the What*" (Eggers, 2008:61-63). It offers a way of thinking about story as "the idea of the story," lending flexibility to intentions and effects.

One 'idea of the story' may be located in how the narrator's overt silence could constitute a critique of the social silencing of refugees – an *imagined* rather than uttered telling, to a random *unlistening* audience. *Actually* it is *written*. So as suggested earlier the idea of the story here forms around the reader as the intended audience.

In the idea of the story as dually-sourced, displacement and relocation – in the US and the Sudan region – signal different orientations. These remain in focus through its spatio-temporal structure and narrative mode. Unstable circumstances frequently challenging people's determination, courage and compassion are carefully navigated across locations:

There is a perception in the West that refugee camps are temporary. When images of the earthquakes in Pakistan are shown and the survivors seen in their vast cities of shale-coloured tents, waiting for food or rescue before the coming of winter, most Westerners believe that these refugees will soon be returned to their homes, that the camps will be dismantled inside of six months, perhaps a year.

But I grew up in refugee camps. I lived in Pinyudo for almost three years, Golkur for almost one year, and Kakuma for ten. In Kakuma, a small community of tents grew to a vast patchwork of shanties and buildings constructed from poles and sisal bags and mud, and this is where we lived and worked and went to school from 1992 to 2001. It is not the worst place on the continent of Africa, but it is among them. (Eggers, 2008:370-371)

An idea of the story emerges in the displacement of perspectives: one perspective displaces another as camps resulting from natural disaster ("earthquakes in Pakistan") are strangely conflated with those resulting from political deracination ("But I grew up in refugee camps"). However the progression from an 'external' view of a refugee camp to an individual refugee's account does enable the reader to become critically aware of any conceptual barriers in their own "perception" of the life of a refugee. Received impressions "(w)hen images ...are shown," reveal "vast cities of shale-coloured tents" then "a vast patchwork of shanties" as the description moves closer to another reality. Only after subtle shifts in focalization, does the reader learn that the narrator spent ten years of his youth in one of the "worst... place(s) on the continent."

Eggers is diligent in his attention to the internal pacing of the story. He sets an unrushed emotional and narrative environment for the unfolding of events through efficiently-selected detail and nuanced dialogue.

Images and Memory

While the previous extract transcribes media images, images are also used to negotiate transitions in this text. On the long walk from Sudan to Ethiopia, the narrator recounts: "I still remember the day I made, the best of days, stitched together from so many....It is the

day I memorized and the day I still feel more vividly than any here in Atlanta./ IV/ I am six years old” (Eggers, 2008:32-33).

Here images and imagination create a bridge-passage between immediate and recalled time. Addressed to the boy of the break-in, “TV Boy,” now a covert narratee, the words signal a link to the narrator’s childhood. Anticipating the scope of the story, this image introduces the difficulty of memory as narrative in transit: “the day I ... stitched together from so many.” Foregrounding the work’s imaginative artistry indicates that writing, like remembering and telling, involves selection. It will therefore show the smudging which time, distance, perspective and emotional constraint bring to bear upon such processes. The idea of the story is not always the story as it is heard (or told).

For instance, a childhood friend William K’s tendency to invent yarns now makes the narrator reflect on how he “...filled the air between us with his beautiful lacework of lies” (2008:195). Story-telling as “lacework” invokes material and textual fragility and inconsistency. K’s tales reconfigure time and place, promise and hardship, truth and lies so that in him the idea of the story signifies a yes to life. Through him the text aligns itself with a creative response in conditions opposing life. The children become impermanent assistants or acolytes to each other, with their bodies, their stories and their listening.

So the idea of the story works with the recreation of simultaneous realities. This also occurs through the adult narrator’s selection of covert narratees who become unwitting acolytes.

Requiring an assistant is a frequent reality for refugees. This text itself is the declared outcome of Achak Deng’s search for an assistant. The following extract is an instance in which the matter of support is addressed:

When I began working and studying I saw the Newtons less, but their door, they said, would always be open. Now, this morning, I know I need to be there. I will knock lightly on their window, the one by the kitchen’s breakfast nook, and Gerald, who wakes up very early, will come to the door and welcome me in. I will nap on their couch, the brown modular one in the TV room, for one luxurious hour, smell in the house’s aroma of dogs and garlic and air freshner. I will feel safe and loved, even though the rest of the Newtons won’t know I was there until I am gone.

I drive to their house...leaving the disarray I live in, by the highway and amid the chain stores, and entering the shaded and winding roads where the lawns are expansive, the fences immaculate, the mailboxes shaped like miniature barns.

...but when I arrive ...the plan seems ridiculous. What am I doing? It's 4:48 a.m., and I'm parked outside their darkened house. I look for lights on inside, and there are none. This is the refugee way – not knowing the limits of our hosts' generosity. I am going to knock at their door at nearly five in the morning? I have lost my head. I am tired of needing help. I need help in Atlanta, I needed help in Ethiopia and Kakuma, and I am tired of it. I am tired of watching families, visiting families, being at once part and not part of the families. (Eggers, 2008:355-356)

In this chapter of the text the narratee is dispensed with and the reader finds themselves in this 'vacated' position. A clichéd reference to an "open door" gains poetic poignancy as the narrator's imagination, perspective and life experience give it significance through prolepsis before this is retracted. It is the voice of his refugee self which he takes seriously. While this family-home affirms an emotional need, the route there exposes unbridgeable class positions. The words "disarray," "highway" and "chain stores" suggest economic freneticism against the tone of established security in "shaded ... winding ... expansive ...immaculate."

But critical here is the road-fatigue of a refugee. "Needing watchingvisiting...being at once part and not part of the families," in the present continuous, underscore refugee-status as dependant, observer, commuter, outsider. Eggers presents a refugee not only in a context subsumed by earlier contexts, but with the awareness of these experiences as an expression of displacement encoded in their life.

Bearing an oppressive tone, the label "refugee" itself here reinforces this profound constraint of being reliant on assistance, particularly because as in Derrida's idea of the acolyte (2002), the assistant is bound to disappear.

So while *a* story may remain, it has slipped away from both Deng and Eggers into a shape of its own. As in the actual life of a refugee, there are identity shifts, altered names, collaborative acts with unpredictable outcomes, a multiplicity of stories orbiting what is ever told orally or in writing.

The text thus invites a reassessment of familiar categories when considering the account of a refugee's life in the context of a creative work. Perhaps the final paragraph of Foucault's text, 'What is an author?' assists with some of the questions raised by Eggers' text. He says:

All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would ... develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We

would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (Foucault, 1969/2003:391)

In Foucault's discussion of an historically-shifting interest in "the author," he transfers the focus from author to field, "later...plac(ing) more stress on relations between discourse and other social practices" (Bullock et al., 1977:232). This "later" emphasis is appealing in an analysis of the text *What is the What* for its view of agency – as *institutionally*-situated. Foucault foretells the arrival of new questions. Texts will be viewed and analysed for their communal origins where the manuscripts of human life survive, are read and investigated.

The extent or the effectiveness of Eggers' "novel" in telling Deng's story is thrown into relief with the help of Foucault's questions: these may be read as both helping and hindering the process of probing several aspects of the text, *What is the What*, though as argued here, before considering Foucault's new questions, it seems necessary to have begun with the "old."

The project *What is The What* foregrounds the concealment of one 'text' inside another. Because the real Achak sought "a writer" for his story, it is his search, and the research that is his life, rather than his story that is represented *by* this text. What is represented *in* this text is the story of a refugee. In this reading, *What is The What* is therefore neither an autobiographical novel nor a novel autobiography; it is also neither an autobiography nor a novel. Story-courier and therefore writer both disappear as the text becomes something neither intended, a story essentially independent of either, derived from both, the lost voice of a once Lost Boy in the dust jacket of what is claimed to be and acclaimed as a novel.

Foucault's questions suggest that attention to the text's dual-orientation may lead inwards rather than outwards. A focus on two individuals may obscure the communities associated with them, those with whom Dave Eggers continues to collaborate creatively, and those to

whom Achak Deng ascribes his survival and who represent him as much as he may have hoped to represent them in this text.

Chapter Three: A Discussion of *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* (2011) by Jonny Steinberg

Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York (Steinberg, 2011) is Jonny Steinberg's text on the lives of two Liberian refugees turned exiles. His narrative strategies reveal a participatory approach to the challenge of presenting refugee accounts. These are constructed from Steinberg's interaction with the protagonists Rufus Arkoi and Jacob Massaquoi, community activists both in Liberia and in Staten Island, New York. While the text may be seen to centre around a conceit suggested in the title, namely that the war in Liberia echoes in the lives of the protagonists in New York (Steinberg, 2011:264), caution about this remains necessary as the lives in the text continue in their ardent socio-political quests outside it.

In Eggers' text the collaborative relationship between refugee and writer is most overtly presented in the *frames*, 'autobiography' and 'novel'. In Steinberg's the pre-written process forms 'part' of the narrative. His rigorous interest in narrative acts generates an inclusive evolution of the story and the text. So while the Preface in Eggers' text invigorates the reading of the whole, in Steinberg's it is the Epilogue in particular that energizes its narrative exploration.

As these collaborative projects raise critical questions concerning the effects of textual mediation on the voice of a refugee-exile, so the emphasis shifts from the interiorized subjectivity of Eggers' text (with several covert narratees) to an interactive subjectivity in Steinberg's.

Little Liberia is the story of two refugees from Liberia – Jacob Massaquoi and Rufus Arkoi – who first encounter each other in New York. Rufus' arrival precedes Jacob's by fourteen years, so their stories emanate from separate experiences of the war in Liberia – Doe's and Taylor's offensives respectively. Set in both Liberia and the US, the accounts of these refugees-turned-temporary-exiles move between times and places determined by forced relocation.

The four-part text is structured in such a way that it may be said to have three protagonists who double-up as narrators: Johnny Steinberg, Rufus Arkoi and Jacob Massaquoi are

presented as each taking their part in this narrative “odyssey.” The word protagonist is activated by the writer to take all the meanings conferred on it: “1. the leading character in a drama...; a prominent figure in a real situation (and) 2. an advocate or champion of a cause or idea” (Pearsall, 2002:1149). Each protagonist may be seen to fulfil all of these roles in their own way as this discussion intends to show.

The Title

With a place name at either end the title, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* (Steinberg, 2011) presents itself overtly as an historical-political bridge. “(I)nvented by the United States ... as a country to which freed slaves ... could be returned ” (Moorehead, 2005:61), Liberia’s early ruling class constituted a cultural-political ‘Little America’. This comes full circle in Steinberg’s comments on Jacob’s first impressions: “It amazed him that he had travelled all the way to America, only to find Liberia writ small” (Steinberg, 2011:198-199).

The paratext presents a map of Liberia opposite one of New York. So the word “odyssey,” resonant with associations of epic movement, histories and literature, here picks up further overtones of exile and refugee journeys.

The relatedness between these elements is what I wish to explore in this part of the thesis with the assistance of Edward Said who suggests that to address these today, “to concentrate on exile as a contemporary political punishment, you must therefore map territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself” (Said, 2001a:175).

Said emphasizes the importance of identifying links between economic suffering as an intended outcome of displacement, and texts responsive to such life-history. Noting with irony the vicarious literary appeal exile has held, he acknowledges the contribution of exilic writers to literature and critique. But he redirects attention to the experience itself as a plight that is a point of enquiry simultaneously: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.” He asks “why ...it (has) been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture.... the age of anxiety and estrangement?” (Said, 2001a:173).

With an exile's perspective of the contribution of 19th and 20th century literature about exile, Said suggests that we "...first set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created.... of the refugee-peasants with no prospect of ever returning home, armed only with a ration card and an agency number" (Said, 2001a:174-175). To do this he says, "means that you must leave the modest refuge provided by subjectivity and resort instead to the abstractions of mass politics" (Said, 2001a:173). Poignantly he asks,

Negotiations, wars of national liberation, people bundled out of their homes and prodded, bussed or walked to enclaves in other regions: what do these experiences add up to? Are they not manifestly and almost by design irrecoverable? (Said, 2001a:173)

Said is concerned about the continuity between the crises of individual turmoil and the institutional manoeuvring directing these. He draws links between the actual and textual complexity involved in representing displacement discursively.

Read alongside these assertions, the texts under discussion take on the task of attempting to 'recover' some of 'these experiences.' *Little Liberia* focuses on lives as they move in and out of the text. It thereby invites enquiry into its own attempts to "manifest" such experience in the "design" of its narration.

Through his collaboration with Jacob and Rufus, Steinberg appears to hold together his version of "the modest refuge provided by subjectivity," while simultaneously presenting the "abstractions of mass politics." In the Epilogue especially the unwieldy effects of bringing these life orientations into play are felt keenly by the protagonists.

The Epilogue

Steinberg's 'experimental' treatment of narration and voice converge most clearly in the Epilogue, a kind of internal editorial workshop, a space between the protagonists' lives and their part in the representation of their lives. Here Steinberg hands proofs of the finished manuscript to Rufus and Jacob, afterwards engaging with their respective non-/responses and noting limited changes. In this section the transition from conversational exchange to printed artefact is experienced in its full glare. Strong responses do battle with self and motive.

In the Epilogue Steinberg, leaning into his role as writer, records and takes into account the alterations suggested by Jacob but retains the image of Jacob his text has brought into being. Rufus is unperturbed by the manuscript: "You are a writer. That is your world. I play in your world....In Liberia if you're educated, you go into politics. That is not my world either. Mine is sport. That is where I belong" (Steinberg, 2011:267). In characteristically half-disinterested terms, Rufus summarizes the position of each protagonist. He perceives difference as a safeguard, therefore the text and the relationship pose no threat to his self-projection. Steinberg conveys Rufus' irony by including "I play in your world," but adds his own perspective on Rufus' position, "in this world, you can wish away all paradoxes and contradictions" (Steinberg, 2011:267).

Thus co-operating in the task of presenting themselves, the protagonists and writer participate in generating the text. This exchange continues in a flow between story and history, background and foreground. At one point Steinberg says of Jacob as he talks about a massacre:

As he speaks, the expression on Jacob's face is as blank and as hurried as his words. I want to ask him to slow down, to remember more, to try to resurrect something of what he was feeling. But I sense the considerable weight of his pride crouching low over this experience, sheltering it from my eyes. It is as if he has turned on a tape recorder, replaying words he formulated long ago, words he has not thought about or listened to in a long time. (Steinberg, 2011:88)

The relayed hurry with which Jacob speaks, does not obscure the unutterability of what he cannot say. Steinberg's reference to "pride crouching (and) sheltering" subtly notes a survivor's trajectory of anxiety about relating the events. Articulating such memory summons defensive strategies for the writer-listener is perceived as a threat. The "irrecoverab(-ility)" Said speaks of (2001a:173) is alluded to by Steinberg as an alienation between Jacob and Jacob's account: "words he had not thought about or listened to in a long time." These banished words, avoided even in inward reflection conceal what cannot be said. The writer's layered listening allows Jacob's narrative reluctance to convey this. It is quite different from the 'memory-bound' narrative flow in Eggers' text where the narration is mostly 'unuttered' and the 'listening' therefore largely 'inactive'.

By naming himself, Steinberg steps into the role of the writer-narrator overtly allowing the relational and narrative complexities to gain a deeper colour for the reader in the detail, substance and manner of narrative development.

Steinberg touches on motivations, and fills in the nuances of character his friendship with each protagonist has illuminated, casting these in as his impressions rather than as permanent descriptions. In this apparently even-handed way he leaves the reader with an important space in which to see his, the writer's, participation and intervention. In the interaction and reflection that 'precede' the writing all three are rendered susceptible to fluctuations of mood. For instance, in the Epilogue, after Jacob has read the proofs, he responds:

'When I read about myself arriving in New York, it is not me. You do not show the reader what I saw, what made me do what I did.'

'I used the material you gave me, Jacob,' I said. 'What else did I have to work with? I asked you countless times what you saw when you came to New York. You closed up each time.'

'Of course I closed up. My feelings about these things are ... they are mine. They are for my use, not yours.'

His words stopped our conversation. I had no reply to that, none that would not be blunt and violently self-serving. CNN flickered silently on the television screen. We both watched. (Steinberg, 2011:263)

In this extract, two narrators are seen to contest the roles of two protagonists, only one of whom is also the writer. And for each there is something different at stake as vulnerabilities arise. For Jacob, it is how he may be perceived, how he may remain subjectively private while telling his story in published form. For Steinberg it is the ingredients of 'strong' writing: what 'materials' may suffice to do what Jacob so aptly and so stingingly captures in his admonishment of Steinberg: "(I)t is not me. You do not show the reader ... what made me do what I did." The writer's exasperated disappointment is not hidden; his defensive retort exposes its own weakness in four counter-statements: "I used the material you gave me....What else....I asked you....You closed up." Jacob's agitation aggravates a sore point in a teller-writer relationship. His formulation is robust, characteristically functionalist: "My feelings about these thingsare for my use, not yours." Steinberg gives the reader (rare) access – the writer's openness to criticism of the text within the text.

What this exchange illuminates profoundly is the struggle involved in being a co-creator, a subject and a reader of your own story. What is textually exciting is the depth of the writer's immersion in this struggle, which is also his in similar, more limited and different ways. And outside of this the context of political rivalry in a community of refugees who have fled worse forms, looms with formidable watchfulness over how such responsibility is handled by refugee-teller and writer. The accountability that accompanies writing so close to the political bone is being addressed by one of the protagonists in ways that the writer could not achieve alone.

It is therefore not coincidental that Steinberg has expressed interest in the intersection between interviewing and writing as the following section will show.

Inter-views

Because Steinberg situates himself first as listener then writer, speaking and listening become shared elements of a narrative thus animating 'audience'. Steinberg also interviews a small range of 'witnesses,' so integrating corroborative journalistic traits. The power in this narrative initiative differentiates Steinberg from Jacob and Rufus both inside and outside the text.

In an interview writer and essayist Janet Malcolm says of her journalism: "I present (people) as they seem to have presented themselves to me."⁴ But later Malcolm concedes: "I guess the general guilt is about stories. That you're telling a different story than the subject tells about himself or herself" (Wood, 2013).

Malcolm's statements illuminate aspects of the transactions in *Little Liberia*. In the transition from interview to text dynamic transformations occur in presentation and representation. The crucial clause she uses is "seem to have presented" as it is the stepping-stone to the "telling (of) a different story."

Steinberg closely scrutinizes the interviewer's power to transcribe not only what they think they are presented with, but also their own impressions. In this mode he recalls his meeting Rufus:

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⁴ Author of eight books, Janet Malcolm of *The New Yorker* is well-known for her incisive interviewing skills.

On the day I met Rufus Arkoi, he was in the clothes of his day job....The man from the post office, I thought to myself....I took out a voice recorder and asked him to tell me who he was. 'I am Rufus Arkoi, Liberian immigrant....' I liked his story immediately. A Liberian comes to America, makes good. Back home, an ungodly war breaks out: the world he had known explodes. Some of the shrapnel turns up here in Staten Island, in the form of troubled young men. (Steinberg, 2011:27-28)

The writer is the narrator who initiates, misreads, exposes his assumptions and intentions. Steinberg's summary is caustically self-critical of his role also as interviewer: he presents a cinema blurb reference to a story that will proceed to carefully undermine crass journalistic objectives and the cool lingo that turns "young men" into "shrapnel" just like that. Rufus will become 'his own' protagonist who will present a self to the writer through his story and his more muted telling of it. Prompted by a question that is posed not asked, Rufus declares of his activist-energy: "I wouldn't call it ambitiousness. I would say that I have unfinished business" (Steinberg, 2011:267).

So while the presence of a voice-recorder and a prompting question suggests an interview, through its narrative style this text also skilfully enters and exits the emotional and motivational terrain that links speaker to listener and location to story.

In a *Sunday Times* interview with Jonny Steinberg, Aspasia Karras recounts:

He (Steinberg) tells me that Malcolm is the journalist he has learnt the most from. 'She writes about the things that preoccupy writers, the relationship to the people you write about, how you represent them and what an honest representation should be,' he says. (Karras, 2008)

In his text Steinberg takes up these challenges allowing the "preoccupy(ing)" concerns to come into contestation with robust responses to being written about. With similar rigour and attention to complexity he extends this approach to interpretations of the war, relocation, and participation in the life of a displaced community, as this discussion intends to signal.

Little Liberia presents individuals whose interest in their social and political environment is unquestionably transferred from their home country to its colonial ancestor. Steinberg respectfully follows them about their community activities so that writing is seen to find a place in the ongoing movement of their lives. With the writer, the reader crosses the

artificial borders between sociological, personal, political, historical and literary zones. The text presents itself as an interesting problem to such divisions.

In this way the reader is given entry points to the stories of each protagonist.

Identities change shape between active and reflective spaces. In Jacob's case becoming a refugee from Liberia resulted from mobilizing critical resistance; in the case of Rufus, his community-enhancing self-employment transmogrified into political danger. As in a kaleidoscope, the detail of their accounts subsides as the stories form in the writer-narrator's careful arrangement of interaction, personal impressions, recall, witness:

My face must have gone ashen, for Jacob pointed at my cheeks and laughed. When he had spoken of Newton and Marx and his radical questioning of the world, I had identified with him. For I, too, had been a student activist, and I knew what it was to sit in a lecture theatre and pick away at the foundations of the world while, not far away, soldiers patrolled the streets. But casual executions of classmates by low-ranking soldiers: what do the laws of motion and gravity mean in this context? From where did Jacob find the motivation to go home and read about the physics of supersonic travel? (Steinberg, 2011:66-67)

The vitality between writer and protagonist notwithstanding this extract also brings into play a shared experience of student activism. It connects not only fields but experiences of study in contexts of resistance, enabling the reader to consider the immediacy of their own awareness of political force in an environment assumed to be familiar. Offering a clue as to why Rufus and Jacob were approached for their stories, for South African readers the extract, like the text as a whole, also offers a bridge between concurrent forms of violence in this country's divided past (and present) and its current brutality towards refugees. Yet the violence described by Jacob may be seen to be unbearable to the writer as he turns in that moment towards the small relief of reflecting on its impact. The details of Jacob's story are precariously poised on the writer's reaction inside the text and on how the text may be read.

So a key challenge in such an interactive approach to narration is how to integrate political analyses and personal suffering. Necessitated by the lives of the protagonists it may be argued, both Eggers and Steinberg show awareness – to varying degrees – of the import in Said's question when he asks:

Is it not true that the view of exile in literature and moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that ... it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography? (Said, 2001a:174)

Each text grapples with some part of what its protagonists have to deal with – the losses and the fragmentation they have to continue to manage, the ruptured lives they have experienced personally and collectively. In each of the texts, the protagonists show a deeply-aligned consciousness of shared hardship and activism based on this.

The experience of having been displaced, having to be identified as a refugee, then as an asylum-seeker, perhaps as an exile, this body of “irrecoverable” (Said, 2001a:173) experience forms a geo-political layer on which the texts place themselves uneasily. In those moments when *Little Liberia* relates this limitation, then in some way it seems to achieve a degree of amplification of the voices it tries to project. For example, in a description of the evolution of Park Hill Avenue (in Staten Island) and Rufus’s part in it Steinberg writes:

A sense of great unease descended on Park Hill Avenue. Everyone, by now, had lost someone in the war. Everyone knew that the streets on which they had grown up were deserted or filled with strangers. Until the refugees arrived, the devastation had resided only in their imaginations. Now the destruction took human form, embodied in these apparently feral beings. They were evidence of war’s power to mangle the familiar into something strange. The refugees, especially the young men among them, were not a welcome sight.

But they did play soccer. And Rufus Arkoi watched them gather on the Stapleton Fields. What he saw nobody else on the planet could possibly have seen, his vision so thoroughly soaked in the memories of two sewing machines and a soccer field. (Steinberg, 2011:166)

The writer allows the abstract references invoking alienation to accumulate into an *unbearable* confrontation with their past, to use Said’s adjective. “(U)nease, ...devastation, ...destruction” – these are what have come to lodge in the exile’s “imagination.” The word “resided” is poignant here, followed as it is by an image of refugees as “destruction ... embody(ing)” humans. And the personification is cutting for its reversal. Rather than finding the new country “strange” it is their own country-people – displaced and “mangle(d)” by war’s dehumanization – they find mutilated into “something strange.” This description marks a powerful attempt on Steinberg’s part to approximate the desolation of such experience.

Almost falling short of being a metaphor Steinberg's image – "feral beings" – is disturbing for the 'naturalized' alienation it invokes and because it suggests an unchangeable state of homelessness that can be only remotely addressed. While the refugees had become estranged to themselves and to one another, this phrase estranges the reader.

By describing Rufus' "vision" in this context Steinberg delicately personalizes political anguish. The accessibility of the image of Rufus' "memories of two sewing machines and a soccer field" salvages from his life-history a subtly-placed but reasonable hope.

As he had done in Liberia, Rufus channels the distractive appeal of sport into an ambition for education: "My team is a vehicle through which young people can rebuild their lives.You do not play just to win. Beyond that, you play to go to school" (Steinberg, 2011:241). Rufus' skills, the footholds to his progress in Liberia, are also the reason for his flight from it. The displacement Rufus experiences on having had to leave Liberia suddenly, is differently present years later on his return visit with Steinberg. After the former has just given Star Radio Studios an interview outlining his plans, Steinberg comments:

I wondered whether he had just caught a glimpse of the prospect that things might always be so, that there might forever be another barrier, that the Liberia he has held in his heart all this time may not have been real. It is quite possible that, for many years now, he has been adrift in exile without knowing it. (Steinberg, 2011:243)

Within Rufus Steinberg observes "another barrier" – one comprised of the ideals which had grounded his idea of 'home'. Now this unmoored memory of hopefulness forms a "barrier" against the intangible loss of influence that accompanies absence. It is more difficult for Rufus to negotiate than physical displacement.

Hence a complex relationship with the self in a situation designed to render it fragmented in its individual and collective expression becomes part of the challenge confronting the writers of both texts, and their narrators. The phrase, 'adrift in exile' comes close to the label, 'refugee.'

So it is perhaps this challenge or "adrift-ness" which also facilitates creative approaches to the writing of the text as it engages with its own "barrier(s)."

Parts and Wholes

In his Introduction to *Theory of the Novel* Michael McKeon (2000) advocates an historically contingent take on the novel as related to narrative in general. Foregrounded in this volume are dialectical approaches to the reading of narratives, which demonstrate both flexibility and 're-flexibility'. In McKeon's words,

Dialectical method ...here is...a technique of discovery that proceeds by dividing wholes into parts and by disclosing wholes within parts. Beginning with any integral category ("the novel," "literature," "labor," "the nation," "gender"), it seeks to understand how, and under what conditions, that category is usefully seen both as composed of constituent parts and as one part of a larger whole. (McKeon, 2000:xvii)

Reading within an Hegelian perspective, McKeon stresses:

At the center of that formula, 'antithesis' captures the contradictory moment of dialectic as the combination of opposites: position as negation, identity as difference, the whole as incomplete part, the part as integral whole. (McKeon, 2000:xvii)

McKeon advocates an element of "open-endedness" (McKeon, 2000:xvii) in critique that is also engendered in Eggers' and Steinberg's texts. These narratives each represent both "part" and "whole" as they link histories across continents reflexively. In more and less controversial ways Eggers and Steinberg exert pressure on the delimiting parameters of one or other genre, to "captur(e) ... contradictory moment(s)". Their texts bring to a head the disquieting relationship between lived experience, narrated story and narrative appearance. They challenge the frames of category and process.

Steinberg describes different perceptual influences that form the text and determine what gets depicted. He comments of Jacob's critical feedback on the manuscript proofs that,

(t)he 'Jacob' he wanted me to present in this book was a drained and inanimate being, shorn of personal ambition, of self-regard, of anger, of intemperance.... 'I cannot write such a person,' I replied. 'And nobody will want to read about him. He is too boring. A person only becomes a human being by imagining his future.' (Steinberg, 2011:261-262)

Jacob's objections relate to identities located between communities present and absent. While Steinberg desires to show a more 'whole' complex Jacob, this sharpens Jacob's view that only an incomplete one will do. But Steinberg's alignment of being human with the

habit of “imagining a future,” and also with the text’s reception presents a relational fissure. What Jacob lives and how this gets written are being separated by a writer’s credo. This may be why Jacob regards textual appraisal as inadequate. In Staten Island, as in Liberia, his seemingly irrepressible capacity to initiate projects for community upliftment already presents a vital argument for “imagining (a) future” (Steinberg, 2011:261-262). This irony concerns the text as much as it does Jacob’s life.

Little Liberia labours with reflexive tension *inside* the text, concurrently offering the story of its creation as a story in itself. Such “open-endedness” does something to shake the formats in which deeply troubling accounts of human dislocation become severed from the level of participatory interpretation they might invite – whether in the fields of history or literature.

Because Eggers’ and Steinberg’s texts each originate in recounting and recording – an *actual* split between event and description that calls the Narratologists’ bluff – these texts ask that voice be considered in the light of what may be found in the sum of such processes.⁵ The part requires to be understood in relation to the whole: “Artworks and historical events, like our reworkings of them, are inseparable from their moment” (Hamilton, 1996:14). Hamilton’s particularly Marxist insight enables critique of both history and literature to observe situated-ness as a link between itself and what it examines or produces.

In some way reiterating this, Sean Field in a review for UCT’s Centre for Popular Memory observes that:

Steinberg’s narrative framing of an *African Odyssey* holds the tensions of history *and* memory by tracking not just a single life but the inter-subjective tensions between two lives placed in relation to communities of the past and present. Crucially Steinberg also does not close off their ongoing inner and outer struggles with the pain of the past. (Field, 2011:120)

Significantly *Little Liberia*, as Field sees it, does not isolate the issues it raises. He values the “inter-subjective” treatment of relational and historical dynamics as this allows links to be detected between a pained interiority and the severe external pressures that Jacob, Rufus and (their) communities confront.

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⁵ Critically appraised as “form over content”, “Narratology” is the Russian Formalists’ term for exploring this distinction (Buchanan: 332).

Interestingly here “inter-subjective” can be read to signify both area of enquiry and protagonist. The “tensions” Field identifies are mediated by the third protagonist – writer and narrator – in an act of further inter-subjectivity. This role challenges the idea of writing and texts as narrowly solitary processes and products. The immediacy it creates about the text is itself enabling and encouraging of an inter-textual transnational appreciation of its subject – written refugee voices.

As stated earlier Steinberg’s closely-focussed listening forms a basis for inter-subjective enrichment in the text as the following extract illustrates. Removed from his home village by his father to help him access education, Jacob left home early:

Jacob did find a proxy for his mother’s love during his time in Sanniquellie. But it is difficult, unacknowledged love; its traces are concealed in the folds of the story he tells.....Much later, when he is discussing his adulthood, he tells me that he speaks enough Kissi to pass for a native speaker.... ‘Where did you learn Kissi?’ I ask. ‘From my Muslim grandma,’ he replies.” (Steinberg, 2011:50-51)

The emotion in this recorded exchange derives from the narrator’s role as audience. He hears what he is *not* told about what he is told: “...*unacknowledged* love; its *traces concealed* in the folds of the story he tells (my italics).” This delicate metaphor for story conjures up the image of a child at the skirt of its mother and the unnamed experience of love that belongs to children.

The word “traces” suggests that the invisible inaccessible resources of memory and what is hardly said form faint narrative prints offering an impression of something other than a seemingly straightforward account. Steinberg’s listening allows the reader to note a level of narrative uncertainty in delivery (both spoken and written). What is “difficult (and) unacknowledged” invites the reader’s interpretation of Jacob’s rendition of his life. Respectful of Jacob’s emotional reticence, Steinberg gently deduces the connection between affection, communication and expression. He perceives the intimacy that teaches a ‘mother-tongue’ and the power it affords, as the text reveals later when Jacob’s native facility with Kissi saves his life.

Such careful rendition of their interaction also allows the unpredictable dis/connections with memory and story to create the present relationship as a new story.

The often-recurring experience of being shunted from the places of refuge necessitates a careful handling of narrative power, especially when approaching the stories of refugees 'textually'. Thus the word 'power' will be viewed in close relation to 'subjectivity' in the context of this 'textual' relationship.

Subjectivities

In his argument about expressions of western "cultural pathology" Jameson speaks of "(a) shift in the dynamics ... in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (Jameson, 1991:63). In a different but related way, the content and manner of production of the texts here reflect an alienation and a fragmentation in their narrative subjects. At one point Steinberg exclaims:

The more I listened, the more incompetent I felt. I had shadowed him (Jacob) for nearly two years. And yet he had decided from the start to keep hidden a sacred piece of him, a dialogue he had been having with himself about matters of the greatest personal import. (Steinberg, 2011:264)

Tested here, Steinberg's commitment to the process-of-the-text enables him to offer this "sacred piece...a(n) (inner) dialogue" as a fragment. The reader benefits by receiving an amazingly literal understatement, that affirms the actual fragmentation Jacob feels or has felt. The text is compelled by its structure, to reflect fragmentation in fragment-form, as summary rather than narrational tapestry.

The preceding detail also hints at allegiances in Jacob's (and Rufus') politically-charged 'subjectivities' outside the text. Ardently expressed by both Jacob and Rufus, unfortunately this becomes unnecessarily contentious for Jacob.

So the text also shows that the complexity of individual subjectivity is no less present in what Spivak helpfully refers to as "the subjectivity of a collective agency" (Spivak, 1988:277). Her formulation points to the element of power that is overtly active in the latter, but also finds expression in individual subjectivity.

The interrelationship between subjectivities through the oral-to-written evolution of *Little Liberia* reveals an alertness to expressions of power. Collaboration between writer and protagonist/s 'situates' the text in the discourse of current history as a democratically-

conceived project. Thus the idea of democracy in the context of this relationship is explored in the next section.

“Rented” Democracy

In questioning relational dynamics on a political plain, Giorgio Agamben points to the problem in using the word democracy at all: “Of what do we speak when we speak of democracy? democracy designates both the form through which power is legitimated and the manner in which it is exercised.... which makes it hard to tease them apart” (Agamben, 2011:2). His query exposes this much-used term as a referent to both practice and frame; the what and how of current history – also ‘the who’. The disadvantage of its ambiguity lies in the assumptions about power it spawns in different ideological domains.

Serious about his commitment to an undeclared but discernible democratic principle in his narrative project, Steinberg reflects on Jacob’s criticisms in the Epilogue. Grappling with the constraints and necessary discipline this ethos entails, he takes up Malcolm’s question and her answer, “Why should the writer in one genre enjoy more privileges than the writer in the other? The answer is: because the writer of fiction is entitled to more privileges” (Malcolm, 2011). Yet the metaphor Steinberg chooses to quote from Janet Malcolm is strange in *Little Liberia* for its reference to ‘owned’ living space:⁶

‘The writer of fiction,’ one of America’s most thoughtful journalists has mused, ‘is the master of his own house and may do what he likes with it; he may even tear it down if he is so inclined. But the writer of non-fiction is only the renter, who must abide by the conditions of the lease.’ (Steinberg, 2011:264)

The implied sanction of private property (here aligned with “fiction”) problematizes ideas of exclusivity and ownership, also in the realm of speaking and writing a story – despite the democratic impulse. Or perhaps because of it. And it raises the question, ‘What does Steinberg see himself as leasing?’ Does he see himself as having sacrificed something in the interests of democratic practice? Of the confines in the categories “fiction and non-fiction”, Steinberg expresses a tone of disadvantage: “only the renter,” and “must abide by the conditions.” At this moment he and Eggers are closest in their dilemma – the split between voice and narration.

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⁶ Not naming her here, Steinberg quotes Janet Malcolm in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (2011).

The Liberian and New York stories of Jacob and Rufus concern an absence of (national) democratic purpose, and their (limited) civilian initiatives towards effecting it. Given its historical background, 'Little Liberia' reflects the gross movement of refugees in the world today as a 21st century market-related manifestation of enslavement, as Patrick Bond's assessment explains:

...the world economy retains features of volatility and unevenness thatare structured into economic interrelationships within the advanced capitalist world, and between the North and South... trade, finance, direct investment, uneven migration and comprador relations – remain central to Africa's ongoing underdevelopment. (Bond, 2006:26)

Jacob's view of himself in relation to Liberia is taken against this "uneven" background. At one point he reflects on what he learnt at school: "Tubman was America's proxy in Africa...with the West behind him, (he) sabotaged African unity" (Steinberg, 2011:53). So perhaps Jacob's most profound image of himself is as a revolutionary for the political security of all Liberians, inside and outside the country. It is bound to a temporarily-necessary nationalist democratic impulse against the displacement and destruction of war.

Epitomized by his ceaseless activity for refugee-exile Liberians, Jacob's work is significant for its critical perspective on international economic relations. Jacob presents and represents a thoroughgoing critique when viewed against the more commonly referred to human rights-based activity whose political value is limited. At one point Steinberg notes, "It was humbling to watch this incurably entrepreneurial man at work. Within months he had brought first rate primary health care to Park Hill Avenue for the first time in its history" (Steinberg, 2011:211-212).

The apparent distance – 'this...man' – Steinberg assumes to describe Jacob here is intended to gain a closer view. What gives him insight is an outwardly-focussed Jacob whose industry is community-oriented. Conflating a capitalist impulse with a liberatory/democratic one: "incurably entrepreneurial," and "he had brought first rate primary health care," Steinberg finds Jacobs's orientation impressive but bewildering.

The novelty (and difficulty) in having to share the space of their relationship thus invigorates the perspectives of Steinberg, Rufus and Jacob.

Relationships

In commenting on schisms determined by colonial practice Said offers some clues as to what may have vexed Jacob and Steinberg in the cul-de-sac they negotiate in the Epilogue:

what is before us nationally, and in the full imperial panorama, is the deep, the profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship with others – other cultures, other states, other histories, other experiences, traditions, peoples, destinies. ... there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves. (Said, 2001a:306)

When Said argues that the unequal demarcations of colonial expansion are still etched into the landscape on which critical relationships are to be established, he is interested in why negotiating them is complex. He sees no space outside of the relationship that allows either to know more or to occupy any position that may be described as impartial. Since neither party can participate in the relationship *outside* it, each has only the relationship itself, and the critical limitations and opportunities this space affords both.

What Said says here touches on the impulses that connect Jacob's personal longing for home with his determined political bent, affiliations that open inwardly and outwardly. A quarantine of either baffles Steinberg; what baffles Jacob is Steinberg's idea of what may be textually interesting about him.

It is with this difficulty that Jacob, finding himself in what may be called a narrative (and personal) relationship with Steinberg, wrestles as he seeks a space outside himself, outside the relationship for a clearer view of his life, one which he thinks will betray less of what he considers politically and personally sensitive. He is acerbic when he addresses Steinberg:

'What is the protocol in your business?' he (Jacob) asked. 'Sometimes we were speaking with the tape recorder on. That was for the book. Other times, you came around and hung out, and I told you stuff because I wanted to tell you as a person, because I grew to like you as a friend. Now some of that stuff is in the book. What's the protocol in your business? You can use that stuff?' (Steinberg, 2011:261)

Some of this "stuff" related to "hurt(ing) the family back home" and "repercussions...in Staten Island" (Steinberg, 2011:260). Jacob sees the "business" of writing as separate from the "stuff" of a relationship. Invisible factors impinge on the relationship and a public

representation of him. While the distinction Jacob makes touches on various theoretical sensibilities, its rather practical description is reflected in the following:

this invitation to remember (concerns)....first, how the narrative of the subject is framed or contextualized; second, how the memories reflect time and space; third, how the relations within the interview are played out in the production of memories. (Bjerg & Rasmussen, 2012:92)

Jacob's concerns are indeed about frame and context, reflection on event, and conversational relations in a joint writing project, concerns which Steinberg seems to have taken pains to navigate carefully throughout. They present insight into the response-to-representation of a refugee-exile whose life is agonizingly determined by political threat, ongoing socio-political insecurity and the fragility of trust these situations have been shown to create and necessitate in Jacob's life. Steinberg, also acutely aware of this observes: "Young, educated Liberians understood that every sphere of life, no matter how petty, was organised around a centre of power, and centres of power could be stormed, their personnel driven into the wilderness" (Steinberg, 2011:55). Jacob had both encountered and acted on this orientation.

So while some emerge, there are stories each cannot tell the other and which will not be heard because, as Said observes, there is, ironically, 'nothing' outside the relationship: it is a composite of the revelations and exchanges which animate it as a relationship. This dynamic limitation extends to the text. The reader's access to the text approximates the possibilities and hindrances manifest in the relationships between Jacob and Steinberg, and Rufus and Steinberg. Steinberg's presence in the text illuminates these relationships and facilitates a similarly engaged reading. The following exchange illustrates this. It occurs once Steinberg has made a visit to Jacob's home in Liberia to which Jacob himself cannot yet return, and afterwards Jacob implores him:

'Tell me more,' he says finally. 'Tell me every story you can remember.'

As I scan my memory for another, I find that I am censoring myself. Sitting face to face, I see that I cannot share some of my impressions of his village with him. Not now.

For the four days I spent in Duazuahplay, I was treated with the most excruciating deference I have ever known. (Steinberg, 2011:250)

Momentarily privy to what Jacob 'still has to discover', the reader is reminded of their own audience-role. What this exchange shows is how relationships within the text are affected

by ones outside it. It brings to life the filigree arrangements of trust that evolve in relationships, especially ones which straddle interaction and a textual rendition of it, individual and community, city and rural. For instance, in the last case, the “deference” alters when the ‘terms’ become clear to the villagers.

Because of his experiences as a refugee there are traumatized silences in Jacob’s story which he himself has difficulty accessing. There are aspects to Rufus’ initiatives (e.g. Doe’s support) that he prefers not to speak about. Steinberg notices and alludes to these with a sensitivity that takes the text into an interpretive space open to the detail and the psychological insight intersecting within it. It seems that while what Said says holds for the possibilities of the relationship while in progress, Steinberg is, despite being positioned in the text, and significantly, despite his relationships with Jacob and Rufus, also outside it. This outside space may be conceived of as the place to which each returns where they will employ the insights and impetus gained from their relationship, to undermine the divisions that control intellectual, creative and political mobility.

Little Liberia extends the scope of what is visible in literature about the experience of exile and the refugee journey that lies both to it and from it. The voices in Steinberg’s text are heard speaking to the narrative process and speaking within it. Such a display of power-sharing suggests that it may be the text’s vulnerability that offers glimpses of a novel strength.

Chapter Four: A Discussion of *Luxurious Hearses* (2008) by Uwem Akpan

Written by Nigerian-born US resident, Uwem Akpan, *Luxurious Hearses* (2008) is a novella from his volume of short-stories, *Say You're One Of Them*. Like Eggers' *What is the What* (2008) and Steinberg's *Little Liberia* (2011), Akpan's text also relies on dual settings, more than one time-line and analepsis. However, *Luxurious Hearses* shifts attention away from an exploration of voice in which the relationship between writer and teller, pre-written version and published text exerts narrative tensions upon and within the texts.

In a primary setting where almost everyone is a refugee, the writer presents a third-person narrator whose narrative control is challenged by the protagonist's predicament. This occurs in a context where mediation and representation of a crisis affecting refugees comes under scrutiny, thus self-implicating the text.

Luxurious Hearses concerns a teenage protagonist, Jubril who is routed from his home by 'friends'. This central event occurs in Khamfi, northern Nigeria. Having been subsequently helped by a stranger to survive, Jubril waits at the Lupa Bus Terminus amongst other refugees who have fled similar attacks. Here he has to conceal all that may associate him with Islam and all that may expose his unfamiliarity with Christianity. Thus precariously 'positioned' in each of these two settings in groups whose labels for him would threaten his life, Jubril suffers the compounding isolation of rejection, threat, disguise and self-imposed silence.

This protagonist's story exposes labels as the politically-temperamental constructs they are. His familiar, distant and new affiliations form focal points in an exploration of the overwriting power and the devastating consequences of social classification. Through collective debate and individual struggles with memory, the text facilitates an interpretation of the pressures arising from cultural association, in the context of political deficiencies.

Luxurious Hearses is set at the turn of the twenty-first century when the struggle for resources once again became enmeshed with references to cultural difference and fraught with old patterns of privilege. Expressions of a history significantly polluted by British divide-and-rule policy have perpetuated destabilization: "Since its independence in 1960, civil war,

military coup d' etat, and consequent military governments have created a Nigerian political environment that is not always seen as stable" (Ejimabo, 2013:2).

In a context of shared physical displacement Akpan's text engages some of these "(un)stable" elements for their alienating, and mediated effects.

Patterns

Wallace Martin expands the Italian meaning of the term novella (and novel) from a "little new thing," to an historical contemplation of the novella as narrative patterning.⁷ Taking a broad view of narration, he says that "(o)ur tendency to look for an orderly "evolution" of narrative is itself evidence of how narratives work: we impose a pattern on the past so that we can tell a coherent story about it" (Martin, 1986:43).

Descriptive and analytical, this view facilitates a reading of Akpan's text in which critical and reflective patterns interweave in the unfolding of the story.

In one 'pattern,' events and their representation keep resurfacing in the interplay between the refugees' 'actual' lives and the media coverage of their situation. Caught up in an unfuelled escape-vehicle, desperate commuters repeatedly view their unfolding crisis on televised broadcasts on the bus. The following is one such instance:

The Khamfi they (the refugees) saw that evening was the corpse capital of the world. Churches, homes and shops were being torched. The sharp unblinking eye of the news camera poured its images into the darkening bus, bathing the refugees in a kaleidoscope of color. (Akpan, 2008:35)

As does the news camera, the light from the television increases the vulnerability of the refugee-commuters, signalling a concurrence between physical *exposure* and media *coverage*. In the words, "torched," "poured" and "bathed," the political-physical dangers fuel represents nationally, are subtly transferred to those of the immediate crisis.

Perception gives way to perspective as the media's "eye" contradictorily *casts out* light whose garishness ("kaleidoscope") is undiscerning and insentient. Seeing or not seeing ("unblinking eye,") images casting light while capturing disaster, the ab/use of fuel as a

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A novella is also described as "a short tale in prose" (Abrams, 1981:119).

common resource – these tropes form reflexive links between the refugee-commuters' experience and the text's representation of it.

Thus through the destabilizing presence of the media, the text focuses critically on the representation of deracination, and by extension on its own narrative response.

For instance the adjective in 'luxury bus', already appropriated in dialect as a "*luxurious* bus" is further changed to "luxurious hearses" when these vehicles are simultaneously used to convey refugees to safety and corpses to cultural burial sites. A sense of apprehension develops as 'terminus' and 'transit' signify the transience of life in uncomfortably literal ways. The dramatic irony in the title sets this novella on a course that interrupts sequences of a practical and cultural nature. As the story opens with a reference to the (later) banning of buses-turned-hearses, in itself the title represents a subversive act.

"Rupture" and Interruption

Bakhtin's interest in 'interruption' as a subversive element in writing focussed on revealing connections between what was traditionally considered serious or "epic," and the pressing questions of current life (Bullock et al., 1977:67). 'The Dialogic Imagination', Bakhtin's appraisal of the novel, engages this dynamic. He sees the novel as having been "powerfully affected by a specific rupture in the history of European civilization" (Bakhtin, 2000:325). For Bakhtin this "rupture" has led to the novel's creative evolution: "its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semi-patriarchal society, and its entrance into international and inter-lingual contacts and relationships" (Bakhtin, 2000:325).

Bakhtin's description of the novel's trajectory resembles that of the protagonist in *Luxurious Hearses*. Jubril "emerge(s)" from a "semi-patriarchal society" environment in Khamfi that has suddenly become "culturally deaf" to him. Through his displacement the writer broadens the focus on Jubril's individual subjectivity in national rather than in regional terms. Consequently at the Lupa Bus Terminus he has to perceive his own in relation to other cultural expressions he encounters there: "Like his multireligious, multiethnic country, Jubril's life story was more complicated than what one tribe or religion could claim" (Akpan, 2008:210). The vitality and complexity of difference is presented as textually interesting but culturally dangerous as it suggests a rupture with monolithic assertions.

Akpan's protagonist is positioned between borders of cultural intolerance. He encounters assertions of it as well as resistance to it, but the challenge of integration is his.

As Jubril is isolated in the group, and the group itself is under attack, the text sets up subjectivity in individual and collective expression – in a respectively defensive and defiant relation to cultural labels. Still it is in Jubril that the dual complexity of this burden is most painfully focussed. So his reluctant reflection on his experience of ostracization, severed relationships and unfamiliar attitudes draws the reader towards an appreciation of his responses. The text processes responses to the experience of rupture within the milieu of political debates and media coverage.

In the light of the seismic circumstances of Jubril's life and those of his co-commuters, Bakhtin's word for what the novel represents – "rupture" – is pertinent here. *Luxurious Hearses* might then be seen as a creative rupture in tension with the representation of destructive rupture. An insight into the writer's approach to refugees illuminates this in the links he makes between displacement, place and writing.

In an interview that forms part of the paratext of *Say You're One Of Them*, Akpan's response to a question about setting is telling.⁸ When asked: "*Have you set much of your fiction in the United States?*" his response includes this statement: "It would be great to set some of my fiction in this country (the US). A lot of African refugees are coming to America now. So that could be where to begin" (Akpan, 2008:4).

Significantly, Akpan's interpretation of the interviewer's question is that if the US were to be the setting, he would still write about *African refugees* there. The idea of setting is displaced by the 'subject' who is displaced within the setting in question. In a seemingly straightforward overlay of "fiction" and "refugees," the making of "fiction" from such real lives is assumed to be uncontentious. For this Nigerian writer now resident in the US this implies a displacement of fiction too; or else a displacement of refugees' experience. In this respect Akpan and Eggers display similar perspectives.

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⁸ Interview by Cressida Leyshon of *The New Yorker*, first published: <http://www.newyorker.com> in 2005.

Yet like Eggers, and Steinberg of course, Akpan's response does suggest that in writing about refugees he confronts actual rupture before exploring its representation. His text, while viewable in Bakhtin's terms as creative rupture, requires vigilant self-scrutiny of itself so as to avoid collapsing the direness of refugees' situation into an account of it that may segregate it from its subject. This possibility accounts for a counteractive aspect in the text, its exploration of representation, nationalist impulses, refugees' debates, and the fragility and resilience of one life amongst these.

A sensibility concerning this challenge is also variously detectable in *What is the What* and in *Little Liberia*. Historical, geographic and cultural juxtapositioning mean that narration and setting are structurally directed by political impulses and their consequences in the lives of the subjects.

Such narrative exploration itself is almost necessitated by the number of refugees in the world whose stories disturb assumptions about 'ordinary life' in every way. As refugees arrive in every field of study with perspectives that must challenge social and political beliefs, a receptiveness – practically and textually – to this 'new' presence, requires a rupture with old practices. In Bakhtin's words, this idea is expressed as an "entrance into international and inter-lingual contacts and relationships" (2000:325). And in a phrase of Adorno's that speaks powerfully of the challenge such stories bring to philosophy as critique, "a language without soil" (quoted by Richter, 2010:3), it is seen as words displaced; by their strangeness disturbing meaning in the line of the text.

In a contributory vein Said says:

To value literature at all is fundamentally to value it as the individual work of an individual writer tangled up in circumstances taken for granted by everyone, such things as residence, nationality, a familiar locale, language, friends, and so on. The problem for the interpreter, therefore, is how to align these circumstances with the work, how to separate as well as incorporate them, how to read the work and its worldly situation. (Said, 2001a:xv)

His emphasis on the writer's world is expanded here to incorporate the subject for whom such "circumstances" have been almost completely removed. In a 'refugee text', such "align(ment)," "separat(ion)" "incorporat(ion)" relate to intra-textual and extra-textual realities. But "the problem for the interpreter" remains. As the precarious relationship

between lived time and its political history impresses itself on each text, the unravelled world of the subject here becomes the unfamiliar helix for the interpretation of 'refugee lives' and the writing of 'refugee texts'. Because refugee, writer and reader are "tangled up in (the same economic) circumstances" the challenge is to engage transnational perspectives in integrating rather than segregating ways. Encouraging readers to interpret the text as part of the context of a shared world whose problems are particular yet also recognizably related, Said advocates a continuative approach to reading – to activate responsive understanding as various textual voices and circumstances are taken into account cumulatively.

Defamiliarized by (always-)unprecedented circumstances, the context of *Luxurious Hearses* too involves processes of "separation" and "incorporation" (Said, 2001a:xv). At one point the reader hears that "(t)o ease his feelings of estrangement, he (Jubril) dug into his bag and pulled out the piece of paper on which had been written the name of the village in the delta where his father was born. He read the name silently many times" (Akpan, 2008:192). This moment incorporates a double rupture from "circumstances" past (an unknown father) and present ("feelings of estrangement"). Reaching tenuously towards a future, the protagonist holds onto a place-name. The non-durability of paper is poignantly juxtaposed for all it represents to him, and a seemingly impossible temporal "alignment" is thereby conferred on the text.

Positioned at a nexus of cultural differences which presents a constant threat to his safety even amongst other refugees, Jubril is shown to develop an "incorporative" reading of the situation. For him "such things as residence (etc.)" (Said, 2001a:xv) have been taken away. His unquestioned sense of home and belonging has been ruptured by his having had to flee his friends. This effects changes in how he considers affiliation. At a moment in the secondary setting when he realizes he has been miraculously spared the narrator states: "He felt connected to his newfound universe of diverse and unknown pilgrims, the faceless Christians. The complexity of their survival pierced his soul with a stunning insight: every life counted in Allah's plan" (Akpan, 2008:262-263).

What is “newfound” confronts what was “unknown”; apprehending “complexity” facilitates “insight” as he feels “connected” to “every life” in this shared experience of survival. These processes in the protagonist provide scaffolding for an intellectual refuge in the present.

In some ways Bakhtin’s view of the novel reflects such a breakthrough as it undergoes a rupture with or re-reading of old assumptions and a concurrent entry into contemporaneity.

The “inconclusive present”

Inspired by the text *Cyropaedia*⁹, in his ruminations about the novel’s emergence, Bakhtin argues that: “(f)rom the very beginning the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality” (Bakhtin, 2000:330). In drawing on cultural and historical cross-currents, Akpan’s text works in a “zone of ...contact” between these and “present-day reality.” Both are shown to be “inconclusive” as the following extract taken from the novella’s opening shows:

It was late afternoon. It was before the new democratic government placed a ban on a mass transportation of corpses from one end of the country to the other. Jubril had worked so hard to forget the previous two days that his mind was in turmoil as he waited to travel south with the crowd at the motor park on the outskirts of Lupa. He knew that even if people were stacked up like yam or cassava tubers in a basket, most would still be left behind. Fortunately, he had paid for a seat on the only bus left. (Akpan, 2008:189)

Intercepting a cultural burial rite, the “ban” suggests governance of the dead, while the living wait on “the outskirts” to flee. And in applying to both, the phrase “mass transportation” introduces the frightening scale of displacement. In the contrast between the words “turmoil” and “waited” – the anxiety to get moving within the stasis of enforced delay – the idea of an indeterminate “inconclusive present” is reinforced” (Bakhtin, 2000:330). So different conditions of marginality mark the route to further displacement.

This “inconclusive present” becomes almost synonymous with displacement as it signifies a refugee’s loss of authority over time-and-activity management. In Eggers’ and Steinberg’s texts the protagonists are seen to grapple with this. And the foregoing extract from *Luxurious Hearses*, reiterates this sense of a space where time seems at odds with itself. There is unnerving tension in the circumstances that link “late afternoon,” “before... a ban,”

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⁹ *Cyropaedia* was written in the 4th century BC by Xenophon who spent many years in exile.

“the previous two days,” “most would still be left behind” and “the only bus left.”

Commenting on such temporal instability Manger and Assal raise a point significant for refugees:

Diasporic history and events are not isolated points on a temporal line, but in themselves make up socially constituted time. People live their lives in several times, past, present and future, represented by real life events, dreams, fears, stories etc. (Manger & Assal, 2006:21)

To some extent this insight – like the primary texts – suggests that the experience of violent displacement requires a revision of the concept of *patterns* (Martin, 1986:43) – narrative or temporal. Manger and Assal propose cognizance of the way in which destructive events not only compress time and experience, but also cause a “rupture” (Bakhtin, 2000:325) in access to rituals and communities that signify belonging.

Nationalisms

This idea finds resonance in Said’s multi-faceted contemplation of exile and nationalism. He views the latter for its attempt at recreating belonging through cultural ritual. Yet he cautions that “(n)ationalisms are about groups but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation” (Said, 2001a:177). Said juxtaposes desolation at the loss of space previously shared with others with forms of nationalism that offer suture for the rupture, yet which cannot address the particularly individual experience of it.

In *Luxurious Hearses* different expressions of nationalism rage in the bus – some in televised accounts, others in the commuters’ reactions to what they perceive as interlocking interests between the exploitation of national resources and their demise. And situated amongst these is Jubril’s isolation.

Yet a fluid unity is to be found between the commuters in their shared desperation, as they are all refugees confronting the same danger. It is heard in the dialogue that veers between cultural beliefs and political persuasions but tends to return to the question of unjust national practices that result in suffering. Such necessary but also tenuous unity constitutes a rallying counter-nationalist response. Its historical familiarity is subtly instructive to South African readers, and others who rally their energies in the ongoing international cause for

political liberation. At one point, just following a television broadcast of fuel being used destructively, the following interaction occurs:

“Nobody go touch our oil again.” Monica said. “Dem dey use our oil money to establish Sharia, yet dem done pursue us out of de nord.”

The bus filled with loud plans about how best to stop the government and multinational oil companies from drilling for oil in the delta.

....

“You be against national interest ... national security!” said one of the two police officers as he pushed his way onto the bus. (Akpan, 2008:237)

As the focus shifts from a representation of the crisis (TV) to the commuters’ (real) analysis of it, the divisions surrounding the question of resources-distribution are outlined cryptically. In this dialogue, oil, abuse of funds, undemocratically imposed law, and deracination are linked in an assertion of resistance. The pronoun “our,” rallies against collaboration between “government and multinational oil companies,” followed by a surge of solidarity (and its idealism): “The bus filled with loud plans.” Dialect differentiates between the voices of the refugee-commuters and those of the state’s representatives (also that of the narrator.) Misrepresentation is exposed in the police’s alignment of “national security” with “national interest;” the refugees are positioned as being opposed to the security they so desperately seek.

Through dialogue individual and collective responses to the representatives, and also the representations of power emerge. Such expressions of subjectivity in both primary and secondary settings show that group projections are also susceptible to the vulnerability of political unity: the protagonist becomes a victim in each location as the group becomes less self-analytical. In this way *Luxurious Hearses* emphasizes that critical vigilance remains vital in both domains.

The protagonist becomes vulnerable in his interaction with a chief on the bus who through a combination of military references and fetishism lays claim to traditional authority and to associations with other influential institutions. Chief Ukongo speaks in low tones: “ ‘My son, Gabriel,” he said, glancing sorrowfully out the window, into the dark of Lupa, “I once enjoyed this country. You know I once did?’” (Akpan, 2008:270). While “son” connotes the acceptance he craves, for Jubril “Gabriel” connotes the self-estrangement of disguise. Still

he gravitates towards what he perceives as warmth. And Chief Ukongo – who has already taken Jubril’s seat – is then able to manoeuvre him into parting with his precious bus ticket as he plays on the sixteen-year-old’s susceptibility:

Jubril liked the fact that the chief was confiding in him, and he thought the chief was more reliable than the other passengers.

He touched a fringe of the chief’s dress, the corduroy material soft on his fingers. Back in the north, he could never imagine being this close to an emir. (Akpan, 2008:271)

Drawn by the chief’s intimate commanding tone Jubril’s non-verbal response is almost an undetectable cross-cultural gesture: “he touched a fringe of the chief’s dress.”¹⁰ This religious allusion points to Jubril’s need for obscurity, healing, human warmth, but also hints at the disempowering effect of awe. That he has only one hand with which to touch anything is poignant because no-one there knows this. This signifies an identity which like his name, he cannot reveal. Instead he wears a Catholic rosary, given to him by his rescuer, Mallam Abdullahi who also “advised Jubril to hide his wrist in his pocket until he reached his father’s village” (Akpan, 2008:276).

Fearing that his accent will identify him as a ‘Muslim from the north’ the protagonist also speaks as little as possible; he even “put(s) a finger in his mouth to alter his accent,” to which the chief responds, “ ‘Remove that stupid finger from your mouth. You are disgusting!’” (Akpan, 2011:242). Jubril’s warped voice, here his projection of himself, nonetheless accommodates reactions and conceals the cultural challenges he experiences, also amongst unveiled women on the bus.

In Akpan’s text the pressure on the protagonist for silence and anonymity is narratively strategic, offering a comment on voice that draws attention to the dangers associated with overt expression. The limitations and possibilities of textual representation are thus approached through his demise as Jubril struggles inwardly with his experience.

For various reasons there is no way for him to speak his narrative, or to reflect on his own trauma using the personal pronoun. A third-person narrator appears necessary.

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A woman seeking help anonymously was said to be healed by simply “touch(ing) the hem of his (Christ’s) garment.” (The King James Bible, Matthew 9: 20-22)

Image and Memory

So, like Steinberg, Akpan works with the suppression of memory as a textual difficulty in accessing the voice of a refugee: "The more Jubril laboured to suppress thoughts of his journey so he could focus on maintaining his disguise, the more his mind revolted" (Akpan, 2008, p. 210). In this sense the third-person narrator's role becomes defined by the struggle with memory and reflection, and also the textual struggle to tell. The complexity of this effort is captured in the words, "labored," "suppress," "focus," "maintaining," and "revolted," articulating this refugee's internal interference when confronting the act of retrieval. It relates to what Said identifies when he speaks of "the (outward) habit of dissimulation (that is) both wearying and nerve-racking never a state of being satisfied, placid, or secure" (Said, 2001a:186).

Inhabiting a state of displacement, suggests Said, does not permit complacency, or intellectual drowsiness. Constant watchfulness becomes habitual. It is a "dissimulation" that must also affect the act of converting memory into narrative; momentarily to displace the practice of guardedness in an effort to reconfigure the retrievable elements of an overturned life into a text.

Some of the hurdles to presenting a self or another in writing discussed in the previous chapters, are implicitly present in Akpan's text through Jubril's difficulty with memory, to which the narrator's 'assistance' is summoned.

The extradiegetic narrator assumes the voice of memory for Jubril through their diegetic presence in the text. In other words, the narrator tells what is audible in the primary setting and also what is inaudible (remembered) in the secondary setting. The protagonist's 'muteness' may therefore widen the rupture between what had constituted his life, and his present situation. While Rimmon-Kenan claims that "(n)arration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:92), this narrative 'advantage' in *Luxurious Hearses* also appears to further 'assert' the powerlessness or voicelessness of the protagonist, who finds safety in keeping silent.

Early in the novella, the narrator notes of Jubril that: “(t)he more he paid attention to the noisy crowd, the more convinced he became that the best way to disguise himself was to speak as little as possible” (Akpan, 2008:192). And:

He (Jubril) wished the darkness of the TV screens would descend on his recent memories, and he wished those memories, which kept pressing to be recognized, were fastened and caged like the TVs.” (Akpan, 2008:206)

In a metaphorical overlay memory and representation interfere with a capacity to cope with the physical demands of the present. Jubril’s flight, and his struggle to banish recall are beyond his control as the simile suggests: the sets’ “cag(ing)” will not prevent the images from appearing. Within the confines of his struggle, well before the prospect of voicing his experience, the narrator appears to come to his assistance, giving an account of Jubril’s responses in un verbalized dreamlike retrieval.¹¹

As an “acolyte” (Derrida, 2002) to a protagonist who rejects memory and avoids speech, the narrator’s ‘knowledge’ becomes necessary. The idea that the narrator will also disappear is ironic and bleakly suggestive in this text.

Meanwhile for Jubril, as undesirable as recalling his recent past is the media’s projection of its likeness, whereas for the other refugees the latter is an enthralling, distracting and disturbing manifestation of their situation:

(S)uddenly the TV sets came on. The images hit him like lightning, driving his face in another direction. He shut his eyes. But he had already seen the images, and, as they say what the eye has seen it cannot unsee. He felt violated. He could not process the pictures right away. The noise from the TVs replaced the din of the bus, as everybody hushed and turned their attention to the screens. (Akpan, 2008:229)

To the protagonist the images are a religious infringement, another form of instantaneous hostility (“like lightning”). He now suffers the added distress concerning what “cannot be un-seen” or disregarded. The images override all human sounds on the stationary vehicle; their associated “noise” has the dual effect of “hush(ing)” real life while capturing its “attention.” Here the text takes on a tone of self-critique.

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¹¹ This formulation is based on Manger & Assal, (2006:21).

Through the battles with memory and the televised projection of the ordeals of refugees, Akpan sets up a critical encounter with the image. The narrative keeps returning to this like a *rondeau*. It does not allow the reader to forget the text in hand is another representation.

So *Luxurious Hearses* reveals aspects of Debord's explanatory introduction to the idea of 'the spectacle.' It captures some of this splintered reflection:

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. (Debord, 1967:4)

In other words, what used to represent living experience is broken up and reassembled to spoil the expressions of life that signify vitality and harmless difference. These piecemeal interpretations are then returned to an unreal intangible world. The detail of this process results in mechanical representations that betray even its own creators. This "spectacle" is the actual undoing of all that is alive.

Such life-(threatening) "inversion" confronts the refugee-commuters as they watch televised transmissions in the "luxurious bus." Their own dialogue is intercepted by images that project similar accounts, fragments reassembled into broadcasts disconnected from conditions in the stationary vehicle and elsewhere. Televised accounts signify this rupture from known life as well as the unreality that is its 'reconstitution'.

So the cultural injunction behind the protagonist's refusal to watch it may here also be seen to protect him temporarily from such fragmentation and to facilitate reflection.

In the narrator the voice of a refugee emerges then as a search for expression through different and difficult processes of retrieval, reflection, concealment and assimilation and how these may affect subjectivity.

Shifting Subjectivities

In her chapter on the postmodern novel, Linda Hutcheon cautions that: "postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices that use memory to try

to make sense of the past. It both installs and then subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity" (Hutcheon, 2000:842). Hutcheon views postmodernism as questioning the misappropriation of memory to constrain the production and perception of history or story. So she suggests subjectivity be understood narratively for the material conditions and the psychological impetuses that form it. In this sense postmodernism can be seen as a critical tool forged from fragmentation and displacement and therefore up to the task of offering an interpretation of refugee experience.

While mostly focalized through Jubril, Akpan's text progresses through shifts between "the subjectivity of a collective agency" (Spivak, 1988:296) and that of the individual in ways that "subvert" both (Hutcheon, 2000:842). Jubril's experience of betrayal is thus narrated through a subjectivity rooted in, and displaced from, the community he has fled:

For Jubril to begin thinking in depth about his brother's death now, after his friends betrayed him, would have shattered him. So Jubril tried to think of Yusuf only in relation to his mother's grief. He could not imagine life without her. He preferred to imagine her back home in the walled compound on the fringe of the neighbourhood, where they lived with his maternal uncles. He imagined her moving from room to room, stroking her tasbih, prayer beads, and crying for him until her eyes became as red and dry as the mud walls of the local silos in the square courtyard. (Akpan, 2008:217)

Here 'subjectivity' shifts subtly between his mother and former community. Emotions such as "betrayed," "shattered" and "grief" convert the "walled compound," "room(s)" and "the mud walls of the local silos in the square courtyard" into an invisible memorial Jubril would still rather avoid. His own grief is located in his mother's as the walls take on the colour of her eyes run "dry" (Akpan, 2008:217).

Jubril's non-participation in his brother's stoning for apostasy, interpreted by his friends then as tacit religious approval but later as disloyalty, represents the joint burden of violence and grief he cannot express and would rather not recall.

The phrases, "to begin thinking," "tried to think," "could not imagine," "imagined her," suggest obstacles to reflective thought and imagination. To invoke Hutcheon, the "narrative(s) (in)stability" is inversely expressed in what "memory" cannot do. But the narrator captures Jubril's struggle to 'voice' his experience and assumes the role of projecting this voice's struggle to an audience/readership. The narrator's reported speech,

“(h)e *preferred* to imagine” (my italics) alerts the reader to further troubling images that remain absent from the text – beyond narration. This suggests a subtle shift in subjectivity now between the protagonist and the narrator.

In this displaced recourse to “the past,” memory does not provide an individual with an easy route back. So it is with the narrator’s assistance that the difficulty of reflection is conveyed – as fragments of subjectivity rather than as a “stable narrative voice.”

The evocation of memory in the extract is also like Said’s metaphor for displacement when the latter describes the experience of exile as “desolation,” “the absence of tonality... a kind of homelessness ... because you’re not going to come back” (Said, 2003:49). The perfect and imperfect cadences that signify a return to the home key – the one that marks an orientation for an entire piece – cannot be expected in atonal works. As with Eggers and Steinberg, in Akpan’s text memory consists of arrangements of ‘displaced’ intervals – split settings, interrupted story-lines, shifting subjectivities.

Illuminating what the singular and complex act of remembering may signify Langer locates this “where the rhythms of chronology disintegrate together with the anticipation of survival. Another persona” she says, “emerges to echo in the present ... a voice that normally would have receded with time” (quoted by King, 2000:3-4). Langer interprets the telling of narratives as a way of experiencing time – past selves are revenant through the telling of ‘their’ stories. In Akpan’s text it is the narrator who may be seen as the other “persona,” the one who engineers temporal realignment in the story of a largely silent, eventually silenced protagonist.

Shifting subjectivity in Akpan’s text then has much to do with silence, collective affiliation and individual isolation. The text confronts the challenge of representing the voice of a refugee whose name, speech and injury will be first hidden then lost. Thus Akpan shows how a third-person narrator serves as a courier of what will continue to be heard once the events are over in his story, but ongoing elsewhere.

The novella approaches its denouement when at last the refuelled bus begins the trip southward, the TV coverage continues and it becomes clear to the refugee-commuters that reprisals in the south are marking the start of a civil war:

The sight of a mosque going up in flames had given him an instant fever, even though he himself had set churches on fire. It was too much for him, and he wept. Jubril had not cried since the gas spilled into his eyes when he lay among the Christians in Mallam Abdullah's house. Now the tears kept coming, and with one hand he caught their watery beads. Sobs shook his body and in this valley of tears he forgot himself – and lifted his right wrist to his face.

He tried to put it back in his pocket, but it was too late. Those who saw it moved away from him (l)ooking at the stern faces around him, Jubril knew it was no use trying to hide. The police asked him to stand up and come into the aisle. They frisked him for firebombs and guns. (Akpan, 2008:318-319)

Jubril's amputation represents affiliation as well as loss. It is the loss of a home community as well as of a hand. It is therefore suggestive of a subjectivity shaped by severance. Its particular pain also signifies the narrative difficulty of projecting what is a national crisis.

As he watches the destruction of a place-of-belonging through a forbidden medium, "(t)he sight," a spectacle wrought of all the shattered material of his betrayal, makes this teenager vulnerable to the anguish he feels about the self he has had to conceal. There is ironic poignancy in the image of the broken rosary of his "watery beads"; and of the double inadequacy of tears before the inextinguishable image of fire.

Jubril's still-bandaged wrist stands for the unappeasable demands of the aggressors on an individual because of and also despite his affiliation – in both settings. Now the commuters remove the bandage, exposing an uneasy proximity between fear and harm, victim and perpetrator. It is only the soldier (cradling a sick dog) who, horrified at the sight of Jubril's stump comes to his defence and shares his fate: "He failed to see a distinction between a religiously-prescribed amputation and limbs axed off by the RUF -Rebel United Front" (Akpan, 2008:322).

Yet significantly, when the other refugee-commuters "mov(e) away" and the police on the bus "frisk him," what is exposed in this moment is not so much who Jubril may be, but the label attached to him; not that he has suffered Sharia punishment, but his being seen to represent it. This decisive point in the story marks an invisible border crossing. Jubril, the "Gabriel" whom the other commuters have interacted with sympathetically up to now, a representative of uprooting like theirs, is no longer perceived thus. Their response echoes that of those he has fled.

By contrast, because of how he has been positioned in each setting, and because of his efforts at assimilation on the bus, he is able to perceive more than they do. He apprehends his situation, taking in their fears while trying to articulate his own with a perspective that reaches beyond the tension of the situation: “He again attempted to convey the mangled story of his religious identity” (Akpan, 2008:320). This attempt signals his remaining belief in their ability to listen, beyond fixed or forced identities.

When Said says: “I have the sense that identity is a set of currents, flowing currents, rather than a fixed place or a stable set of objects” (Said, 2003:4) he conjures not only individual and group affiliation, but the subjectivities representing these textually. Between inner and outer realities, Akpan’s text works with the flux and the fixtures that create or imprison an “identity,” the imagined attachments and actual ruptures that contribute towards the meanings in this idea. In his treatment of “identity” Akpan reveals the perilous link it has with what may be thought of as its abuse – when it is turned into a label – and the devastating consequences this may have in the life of an individual, and a community, and a country. This offers a particular politically-familiar challenge to South African readers, whose prior access to citizenship was determined by labels.

In the midst of collective voices, a refugee’s ‘inner’ voice struggles to be heard. While also threatening to dominate this narrative struggle, the narrator exposes and manages the constraints of moving between memory, reflection and participation in a dangerous environment. Self-critically reflective the text shows a relationship between narrating, interpretation and representation. By placing the media in the presence of the fleeing refugees, Akpan draws attention to mediation as an inescapable aspect of narrative patterning.

Yet concealment of an amputation reinforces the narrative silence through which Jubril’s story reaches the reader. It is this silence which forms a passage for the narrator between the two settings. Insofar as Jubril’s lost hand signifies what cannot be returned or returned to his story overlaps with those of the other refugees’ loss of a place and family. But beyond this, his loss of voice in the context may be seen as a kind of cultural and textual amputation as it is also the function of a hand to write.

As the refugee-commuters critique the representation of their situation, and by extension, the text, within this their treatment of the protagonist requires that their analysis incorporate complexity. In these ways Akpan confirms that efforts to project refugee voices require refugee participation and that a need for compassionate enquiry remains the responsibility of all. Left in transit, the refugee-commuters in *Luxurious Hearses* convey the idea that attempts at addressing the internationally-generated crises confronting refugees occur in narratives that are themselves still in transit in several ways.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

An attempt to explore the textual audibility of the voice of a refugee has directed attention to the treatment of narration and audience in the primary texts discussed in this thesis. This central enquiry has lighted on forms of spatio-temporal displacement suggestive of the relayed narrative processes in which the stories have evolved into texts. Such narrative strategies – and effects – are reviewed here within the structural frameworks of the three primary texts.

Voice and Narration: The Anacoluthon and the Acolyte

The writer-teller relationship is key to the narrative approach in Eggers' and Steinberg's texts. It opens the way for exploring the transmissions and transformations that occur in the process of writing, particularly as linked to that of recounting.

Derrida's description of a narrator-subject relationship as acolyte and anacoluthon – assistant and absent subject – re-activates an unease about whose voice emerges in *What is the What*. It allows the reader to see how "a subject is constituted" (Said, 2000), or made to disappear as an anacoluthon (absent subject) (Derrida, 2002). By framing *What is the What* as "novel" and "autobiography," Eggers' text presents an approach which in some ways dubs one voice with a narrational other. In this respect Deng's quest for a writer's assistance, confined to the Preface, shows the importance of this paratext as "a zone not only of transition but also of transaction" (McDonald, 2013:3).

Adopting a different approach, Steinberg works with interviews so that active listening enlivens the narrative environment of *Little Liberia* in "inter-subjective" exchanges. Here an idea of what constitutes the voice/s of the refugee-exiles may emerge for the reader as they are given insight into the nuances that facilitate or block such exchanges. Narration becomes viewable as a complex of decisions, giving refuge or exposing vulnerabilities the reader is subtly encouraged to observe and thus 'participate in' as listener.

In Steinberg's text each of the three protagonists can be seen in the role of "acolyte" or listener (also as diegetic narrator) at various points. By contrast in Eggers' text, this role is more evident in the 'presence' of an "anacoluthon" (Derrida, 2002): the subject is not

speaking and the audience is not listening. In this sense the subject is 'absent' and the narratee frequently 'disappears'. Eggers' text raises questions regarding such framing of co-operation between a refugee and a writer because within the text it is through the silence which encapsulates the 'telling' that the reader may encounter 'the voice' of a refugee.

Thus the interiority which Eggers' narrative approach creates for a subject is similar to that of Akpan's *Luxurious Hearses*. Despite first-person and third-person differences, in each text narration establishes routes for the challenges memory presents.

In Akpan's text the third-person narrator – as acolyte – alternates between narrative power and narrative vulnerability. This becomes evident as the difficulties the protagonist has with his memory-voice become the narrator's limits to what may be 'heard' in the text. Also, in poignant expression of an anacoluthon, the third-person narrator's relation to a silent, ultimately silenced refugee-protagonist reveals a particular necessity for accessing *such* voices.

Akpan takes on this difficult and necessary challenge by positioning refugees as primary participants in the critique of their representation. The text's projection of refugees *to* refugees signals the importance of this kind of voice where mediation is concerned. In this way Akpan sets up the text for similar critique. Through a self-critical approach to mediation – history, language and political ambush are drawn into the same evaluative space.

While *Luxurious Hearses* does not refer to a writer's relationship with a refugee, it places the protagonist in a like-unlike predicament – a refugee amongst refugees. The text probes the precarious individual and community displacement this is made to signify culturally. In Akpan's text voice may be located in an unarticulated individual and collective cry for an acknowledgement that identity like subjectivity is not stable; this is especially necessary where labels deny it.

Here the text suggests that intellectually open and compassionate responses may be striven for or returned to in a range of situations.

Histories and Stories

Similar in this respect, Steinberg's *Little Liberia* is a text formed from the complexities of individual and collective struggles of refugee-exiles, and from those of a writer in his efforts to access their stories.

As a South African, Steinberg emerges from a country with a history of dispossession in which the majority of its then (non)-citizens were considered migrant-labourers, designated to tiny far-flung economically-destitute "homelands." Emerging from this national space Steinberg's text also represents an attempt to hear the resonant *political* voice of Jacob and Rufus. Through these refugee-exiles' lives the reader is afforded a sense of immersion in the text as historically-situated narrative and process. Thus in a transnational gesture *Little Liberia* disturbs confined notions of genre and narrowly-conceived analytical entry points: a South African writer travels to New York to produce a text which reflects the displaced struggles of fellow-Africans (as Steinberg might say). Given the historically-troubled and deeply politically-troubling responses to refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa today, the living nature of this textual venture offers the South African reader a route to the story of a refugee-exile – in its particularity and its relatedness. In this process there is a reminder of the incorporative work required in an ongoing struggle to overcome the intellectual and social damage of institutionalized difference.

Questions the reader is left with retrospectively are, 'Why does the subtitle refer to only one "African odyssey"?' 'Whose?' 'Is the narrative odyssey the only one?' The title reverberates with a sense of displacement. Through the accounts of dis-location, in *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* the reader is taken into spaces charged with civil activity. This enables them to consider the story of *refugees* turned *exiles* by regarding the variety of fraught circumstances that connect these terms. A narratively inclusive framework opens the corners of textual borders inviting the reader to locate themselves and their responses inside and outside the text.

As with the third-person narrator in *Luxurious Hearses*, the power of immersion both limits and intensifies Steinberg's status as an 'equal' protagonist in the text as it enhances his capacity to present a perspective and commentary (his own and that of others') within the confines of the story, his story, the one containing Jacob's and Rufus'. And while Steinberg

complains of the constraints in the “limited lease” (2011:264) afforded non-fiction writers, he nonetheless positions himself so as to enjoy the liberties of active research *in conjunction with* the creative interpretive facility of fiction writers. In fact his ‘leasing’ complaint (2011:264) seems a little unwarranted given the narrative power he actually exercises in the making of this text.

Steinberg’s ‘complaint’ also draws each of the three primary texts into a contentious zone where fiction and non-fiction, history and story are similarly interwoven with variable emphases.

Yet Steinberg’s placement of himself is also what vitalizes the links between voice and narration in this text. Privy to the arduous road to the stories, the reader is enlightened about the constraints and labour both in the lives of the protagonists and in the quest for and writing of a story. Those precarious moments when Steinberg might or might not have been given the time, or the detail by Jacob or Rufus are what add to a ‘natural’ tension, a credible sequence, a sense of something hard-won.

Thus in placing himself as a protagonist in an “odyssey,” Steinberg brings to life the invisible lines connecting oral and written life histories, literature and survival. He takes creative-experimental routes to their production in text form at the same time revealing that such routes exist in those whose lives survive to tell their story.

Texts

So the texts discussed in this thesis traverse the irreducible space between image and experience, and in the process suggest approaches to perceived and real spaces between oral account and textual narration. Some of their silences imply the work of retrieval, others hint at a voice, an approximation of a presence.

In taking on this kind of writing these writers set themselves up to engage with the circumstances, not only of their protagonists, but also of the globalized environment which makes all *states* protagonists in both the story and the history of the world’s refugees.

Texts which engage overlapping fields of enquiry may be well-positioned to acknowledge the ‘voice of a refugee’ in the inter-subjectivity such tasks generate. Refugees prompt co-

operative responses, or ones which have to confront the limitations and perhaps thereby, the potential of their influence or effect. From these points of departure, textual decisions become inscribed in a 'life story' of their own; and unexpected creative and critical trajectories may develop.

The texts here have shown that there is a proximity between what may be sought as a refugee voice in a text, and the life outside it this represents. So the need for a critical body of writing about and by refugees persists – one which will in some ways reflect in different “planes of activity and praxis” (Said, 2001:214) the crisis that is forced migration today. The initiatives of *Chimurenga*, the Human Rights Media Centre and the Centre for Popular Memory illustrate responses that involve textual and other forms of activism in South Africa.¹²

'Read' in relation to one another, such initiatives broaden the scope of critique. With the texts in this discussion they challenge the problematically-created rift between 'refugee' and 'citizen,' exposing each for its material connection with the other, revealing the spurious but devastating exclusions that borders really represent. Forming part of a range of critical perspectives then, refugee texts may help to identify routes which like the Gaza tunnels, subvert unhelpful constructs.¹³

Texts which raise questions about what is allowed to patrol the borders between voice and narration also increase a consciousness of the reach of uneven practices in the making of such texts. They may thus challenge inequalities that creep into writing, distribution and reading practices through which access to certain voices is restricted, or facilitated.

To conclude, each of the primary texts necessarily presents refugees in a trans-national coercive relationship with their environment. The text about them, in its concerns, its shape and its production finds itself similarly positioned between national and cultural borders. Place, displacement and placement then signify key processes in the relationships between such lives and their texts. So the question of how a refugee's voice is being 'heard' is nuanced by the way the process of telling and writing, or of showing the narrative

¹²

See <http://www.chimurenga.co.za/> and <http://www.hrmc.org.za> and <http://www.popularmemory.org.za> respectively

¹³ “Essential amenities” between Palestine and Egypt are transported through the Gaza tunnels (Harb, 2014).

difficulties of retrieval also broadens and challenges the idea of textual 'ownership' or authorship.

Different and uneven processes reveal what is gained and lost in these exchanges. They may prompt critical readings which take into account that the voice and the narration do not necessarily find a common home in the familiar, author-centred monological formulation "narrative voice". The life and textual voice of a refugee inscribe expressions of displacement which constitute a challenge to established forms of both a narrative and political nature.

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